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*Through
Thick
and
Thin.*

By
Margery Hollis,
Author of
"Anthony Fairfax,"
"Audrey."



In Three Volumes.

Vol. III.

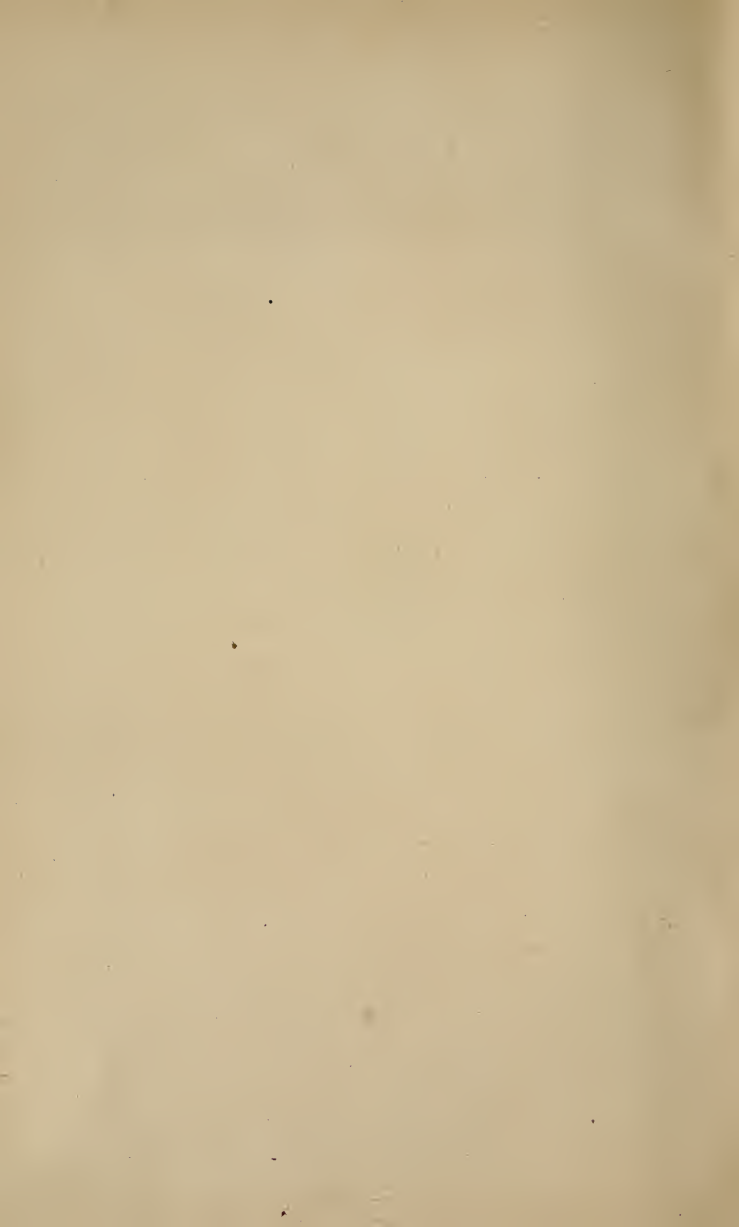
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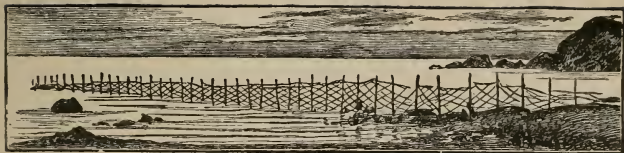
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CONTENTS OF VOL. III.



CHAPTER	PAGE
I. "I NEEDS MUST ACT ALONE" ...	I
II. NEWS	26
III. THE INQUEST	47
IV. "HE DIED LONG AGO" ...	62
V. A FOOLISH FANCY	81
VI. "I AM IN LOVE WITH HER" ...	107
VII. WAITING	128
VIII. A FOOL FOR HIS PAINS ...	147
IX. PELTER'S STORY	164
X. "THINK OF ME"	189
XI. A BEGINNING AND AN END ...	211
XII. "ON BROKEN WING"	234
XIII. THE BRIDE COMES HOME ...	254





THROUGH THICK AND THIN.



CHAPTER I.


“I NEEDS MUST ACT ALONE.”

“Pause not! the time is past! Every voice cries
‘Away!’

. . . Thy lover’s eye, so glazed and cold, dares not
entreat thy stay:

Duty and dereliction guide thee back to solitude.”

SHELLEY.

“H, there you are, Gay, at last!

What have you been doing with
yourself all the afternoon?”

“I have been in the schoolroom with
Jim.”

"You spoil that child," said Sophy, fretfully. "You ought not to give up your time to him in the afternoon; it is quite silly of you to indulge him so much. It only makes him exacting. What were you doing?"

"Mending some broken toys."

"Really, Gay, it is too bad! The idea of wasting your time in that way, and leaving me alone!"

"But I 'knew that you had visitors, dear; you have had quite a stream of callers, and did not want me."

"Yes I did," maintained Mrs. Mildmay. "I wanted you to help me with the visitors. I am quite tired with talking to them and pouring out tea. You *might* have remembered that I do not like pouring out, Gay. You know I am not very strong just now."

"I am very sorry, dear," said Gay, gently. "I did not think you would find it too much."

"I should not have cared about it," acknowledged Sophy, "but we are going out to dinner this evening, and I should like to be fresh. I hate to look pale and tired. Aren't you going to have any tea? That must be cold; you had better ring for some more."

"I don't want any; you know I am going to have tea with Jim to-night."

"Then pray have the things taken away!"

When this was done there was silence for a time, which Sophy broke.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked abruptly.

Gay's reply did not come at once.

"I was thinking of old times," she said

at last, "when you and I were alone together."

"Pray don't think of those dreadful days!" cried Sophy.

"Yes, they were very hard on you. But now and then we were not unhappy, Sophy? We had some pleasant days?"

"Well, yes, there were some, when you seemed to be getting on with your singing," returned Sophy. "But we are much better as we are."

"Sometimes I think I should like to sing again," said Gay, slowly.

"Really, Gay, what will you say next? You would like to go back to it, after all you went through?"

"Yes. I am fond of singing, you know. I feel homesick for the stage sometimes."

Sophy laughed in high good-humoured scorn.

"You are a goose, and you don't know when you are well off. Luckily, you can't go back to the stage."

"Can't?"

"Of course not. James would never allow it. You know that, Gay. He would be horrified to think of any one belonging to him being on the stage. He has strict notions. And you would not like to displease him."

"Then, when I want very badly to return to my old courses, I must run away, that's clear," said Gay, with a laugh.

"Yes," Sophy rejoined, "that will be your only plan. You will never be able to do it with our consent. I wish"—gravely—"that you wouldn't talk so. You have spoken more than once lately as if you would like to sing again, and it isn't kind, Gay. You must stay with me

now. I know Miles has behaved badly to you, but you will soon get over that, now you see how fickle he is."

Mrs. Mildmay poked the fire with emphasis.

"I shall always think worse of Miles," she declared. "I had no idea he could be so changeable. *I* call it unprincipled. I don't think Mabel is to be envied for catching him."

Gay made no answer, and Sophy's conscience pricked her for her want of tact. She must have hurt Gay's feelings by speaking of Miles's sin against her. She stole a glance at her stepdaughter, and was relieved to see that she did not look agitated—there was even a faint smile on her face.

"She doesn't care at all, thank goodness! Of course she has too much spirit

to feel any regret for such a weathercock," said Mrs. Mildmay to herself.

Gay was thinking of yesterday, and the words she had heard then. She was not forsaken and ill-treated, as Sophy believed. He loved her as well as woman could desire to be loved, and the assurance of that thrilled her with joy through all the dark dejection of her mood.

Sophy rose, declaring that, as they had a long way to drive, she must go to dress. Gay went up with her, and helped her in her toilet. The process of arraying herself for a party always raised Sophy's spirits, and this evening she had a new gown to put on which was specially satisfactory.

"It looks very nice, doesn't it?" she said, examining herself with the *naïve* interest of a child.

"You are charming in it," said Gay, smiling, and putting a handsome plush wrap on her shoulders.

"Oh, there's the carriage!" cried Mrs. Mildmay, as the front door bell rang. "Give me my fan and gloves, Gay. Quick!"

She hastened away. In Mr. Mildmay's eyes it was an unpardonable sin to keep the horses waiting.

"Good night, dear," said Gay; but Sophy was in too great a hurry to answer.

Gay looked after her as she ran down the stairs, her long silken skirt trailing, the light catching her bracelets and the diamond star in her hair, and smiled with the satisfaction of one who secures her reward.

It was worth it—worth all she must

give up and bear. She did not grudge one particle of the sacrifice she had made to save Sophy.

"She will never know now. She has escaped all the horrible disgrace and shame and misery. She is happy enough to care for all these little trifles and fuss about her dress and her looks. Oh, thank Heaven that she *can* care about such things!"

Then Gay descended to the high tea which she had proposed to have, as she must spend the evening alone. Jim was waiting impatiently for her, and reproached her for not coming sooner. She ought to be punctual, and he was very hungry. He gave overwhelming proof of the truth of this last assertion, and revelled in nice things unchecked by any of the precepts of temperance which Gay usually bestowed

upon him. Indeed, she encouraged him to eat, and showed a benevolent interest in seeing him dispose of apricot jam and plum cake.

After tea she played cards with him till his bedtime, and only once did she cross a wish of his. He proposed to play at Vingt-et-un, but she said quickly, "No, Jim; not that. I can't play that to-night;" and when he pressed her to give a reason for this curious inability, she silenced him peremptorily.

The nurse came and led Jim off, and Gay was left alone. She opened her desk, and began to write a note to Sophy. She must leave some explanation of her flight; it was impossible to go without a word. It was very hard work to put a few sentences together. Again and again she threw a spoiled sheet into the

fire and made a fresh attempt. At last she wrote—

"DARLING SOPHY,

"I am afraid you will be very angry to find I was not joking this afternoon when I talked of going back to the old life. I cannot stay at Westby Lodge any longer; and, as I have heard of an opening, I think I ought to take advantage of it. Mr. Mildmay has been very good to me, but I must live in my own way and be independent; and, to escape the pain of your opposition, I have not said good-bye. I am going out of England at once.

"Always yours,

"GAY."

That was the best she could do, and she wondered that she had lingered so long over the composition. No pains could make the announcement seem anything but odiously ungrateful and cold-hearted. She would be remembered only with disgust and contempt.

She put the note in an envelope and addressed it; then she went up to her room. She had few preparations to make, for it was better to have as little as possible to carry on the long walk which lay before her. She put together some small treasures—a few trifles precious from association, a photograph of her step-mother, one of Jim, and one of Thornburgh, which she had privately abstracted from a photograph-book of Sophy's. These she could not leave behind.

Then she stole softly into the night-nursery. Jim was asleep, with one arm thrown above his head; and in the calm of slumber his face was sweet enough to give an artist a model for a set of angel faces as lovely as those of Reynolds. Gay hung over him, her tears flowing fast, as she mutely took farewell.

Presently the child stirred, opened his eyes, and sat up, broad awake at once.

"What is it, Gay? What are you crying for? Have you toothache?" Nothing less severe than that pain could account for tears, in Jim's opinion. "Never mind," he went on, consolingly, "I'll get you some medicine. Nurse has some in a bottle—it stopped my toothache. I'll go and ask her for it."

He laid hold of his dressing-gown, highly pleased at an excuse for an excursion from his bed, but Gay stopped him.

"No, thank you, dear; I don't want any medicine—it wouldn't do the pain any good."

"Is it *very* bad?"

She nodded.

"Do you remember how *my* tooth ached

at Christmas? Cousin Miles was here then," Jim observed, meditatively embracing his knees.

"Yes, I remember. Lie down, Jim; you must not talk now. I did not mean to wake you. Go to sleep again as quickly as you can."

She tucked him up, and kissed him fervently.

"My darling Jim, good-bye," she whispered, between her kisses.

Jim's clear laugh rang out.

"Ha, ha, ha! You said 'Good-bye,' Gay; you mean 'Good night.'"

"Of course. Good night, darling."

She turned away, and the child nestled down, chuckling to himself.

"Good-bye," she heard him say as she closed the door. "How funny!"

She quickly dressed herself, putting on

a homespun gown and a warm cloak. She chose the attire most suitable for her journey, with a sick repulsion from these practical details. They brought the tragedy of her lot so near, and yet it seemed so horribly trivial and incongruous when her heart was breaking to think of such things. She put the note she had written on her dressing-table, went down to the schoolroom, and let herself out at the long window. No one met her as she sped through the garden and down the drive ; probably nothing would be known of her departure till the next day.

She closed the gate softly behind her, and stole away in the night. She was dry-eyed now ; her last tear had fallen at the side of Jim's bed ; her emotions were not of the kind that weeping relieves.

The bitter pain she was enduring had

roused angry revolt in her, and she was not mourning over her fate, but asking why it must be. It ought not to have been; it never would have been if her father had done right. Her whole being rose in vehement protest against the cruelty of it. She might have been happy, so happy!—again she felt Thornburgh's arm round her, and heard him say, "You are mine"—and she must lose everything! Her early youth had been cursed by her father's fault, and now she must bear worse misfortune for the same reason. It was not right; it was not commonly just, poor Gay thought, this horrible pitiless law that one sowed evil seed and another gathered bitter fruit.

She began to question the necessity which had seemed so imperative before she left Westby Lodge. Perhaps, if she

had held out against her father and refused to go with him, there would have been no tragic consequences for Sophy. He had reasons for keeping quiet, and possibly he would not have dared to make his existence known. When one side of a question has been adopted and acted on, a marvellously clear light falls on all the other sides, and every probability seems more plausible than that which has been decisive. As Gay plodded onward, she doubted the expediency of her whole course since the day when she had first seen Pelter, and accused herself of having blundered from beginning to end. Something surely might have been done to save her from all the pain she had borne and was to bear.

The glow of satisfaction in her sacrifice had wholly died out for the time; she

felt that it was a price she need not have paid, and she was ashamed of it. No stimulus was given to her fainting courage by any thought that it was for her father's good. That consideration had not influenced her; it was for Sophy, and for Sophy alone, that she had resolved to be Mr. Rushton's companion. She did not look forward to tending him and cheering him by filial ministrations. As has been said, she was sceptical about his need of such services, and she felt very sure that, if he could emerge from seclusion, he would find her society a bore. She could think of herself in the future, when the danger her father darkly hinted at had blown over, only as dragging through the vacant days alone in some strange unhomelike place. He would never submit to the restraints of quiet domestic life; he hated

regularity ; and as soon as she was on his hands, and he felt that she expected anything from him, it would be a *gêne* to him. To possess a claim on Mr. Rushton was to excite repulsion in him.

The orthodox sentiment, of course, would have been tender filial regard and eager readiness to devote herself to her parent, if by any means she might reclaim him. But she was destitute of the home missionary spirit, and was moved by no promptings of self-abnegation in this cause. She thought she had endured and done enough for her father already, and it galled her sense of justice that he should require further tribute. She wanted something for herself now. Great sacrifices are much oftener made under protest than those that benefit by them would like to know. Selfishness

seldom calls forth tender affection and willing service from its victims.

But, for all her doubts and misgivings, Gay went steadily on. It was too late to change; she had promised to go with her father; and she could not turn back. A sense of unreality haunted her as she went. It was all like a dream—this walk in the quiet night, the grey road stretching before her, the stars peeping over the hills, the fresh breeze driving the clouds over the moon.

She had reached the little larch wood close to Kelvers, when she was met by Pelter.

“Am I late?” she asked, instinctively quickening her pace.

“No, miss. I came to meet you,” he said, in an embarrassed way. “I was to tell you that Mr.—Rushton has changed

his mind. He thinks it better that you shouldn't go with him, and he has gone away himself."

Gay was silent in sheer surprise for a moment or two.

"He is not in the house?" she said.

"No, miss; it is no good for you to go on—you couldn't see him. I was to give you this—it may be useful." He put a little parcel into her hand, which she took mechanically. "He will leave you in peace now—you needn't be afraid on the other lady's account."

"You will follow him to-night, Pelter, I suppose?"

"I am going by the mail, miss."

"Good-bye, Pelter."

"Good-bye, miss."

Pelter touched his hat and moved away, breathing hard as though he had been

running. He had never suspected himself of nerves before, but even his wooden composure had been shaken that night.

“Hang it all!” he said angrily, wiping his forehead, “why should I care? I declare when she said in that pretty soft voice of hers, ‘You will follow him?’ I felt completely knocked over. I can’t tell her the truth—a pretty kettle of fish there would be if I did. I’ve done all I can for her—given her all I can spare now, and I’ll send her more when I’ve got it. She had far better not know; it would do her no good if she did. If she holds her tongue it will be all right. And she’ll do that for Mrs. Mildmay’s sake—red-hot pincers wouldn’t make her speak out.”

Gay stood still for a few minutes after Pelter had gone. This sudden turn of affairs was bewildering; and she felt

utterly mystified. She must know more about it, learn the reasons for her father's change of mind, and she hastened through the wood in pursuit of Pelter to question him. But the man was not to be found. She went up to the house and knocked at the door, but no answer came; there was no ray of light to be detected at door or window.

The house looked very desolate and dark with the moorland round it. She turned away with tears in her eyes and a pang of pity for her father's loneliness. She felt tender enough towards him then and full of remorse. While she had been thinking hard things of him, he had been kind to her. He had resolved to leave her behind, and he had sent her an assurance that he would not trouble Sophy's peace. He could be generous, after all, and Gay

felt keen compunction for her unwillingness to go with him, and if it had been possible to reach him would have offered her companionship.

The wail of an owl quivered through the little wood, and roused her to remembrance of the hour. She must get back to Westby Lodge as quickly as possible, and she started at her best pace.

She reached the house, and hurried to her room. No one had been there since she had gone out; the housemaid had not brought the hot water; and her note to Sophy was where she had left it. She snatched it up with trembling fingers and flung it into the fire; then she hastily took off her walking attire and changed her gown for that which she had worn earlier in the evening. There was nothing left to betray what she had been doing; nobody

would ever know of her walk that night.

When she had made everything safe, she opened the packet which Pelter had given her, expecting to find a note from her father. There was not a scrap of writing within ; only bank-notes for £500. She turned them over, amazed to find herself in possession of such a sum, and wondering sadly how it had been made. She could never spend it on herself. Even if it had been possible to lay it out in any way that would not attract notice, she would not have touched a penny of it.

" I might send it anonymously to some charities," she thought, and locked it away for the present in her desk.



CHAPTER II.

NEWS.

“Life seemed a hateful thing to her and drear . . .
. . . Rest had grown a name for something gone
And not remembered.”

WILLIAM MORRIS.

IT had been like a dream to Gay to go away ; but now that she had to stay, the departure and the life beyond it became very real to her, and it seemed strange to turn her mind to the routine of her accustomed occupations. It would be absurd to say that she was disappointed at being left behind ; but there was a blank in her mind, and she felt a diffi-

culty in adjusting herself to the changed state of things.

She was relieved and thankful to have escaped the miserable existence she had foreseen, but still the high-pitched excitement of the last few days had put her out of harmony with her surroundings, and made common life jarring. She was very unhappy; and it was hard work to preserve a calm smiling exterior, and show interest in the trifling events of every day. After all, life with her father would have been more congenial in one way; she might have been wretched without constraint then.

And with him she would have been out of reach of Miles Thornburgh, whose neighbourhood would make Westby Lodge a place of penance for her. There she must meet him often, and hear of him

constantly. She would watch the progress of his courtship, for he would marry Mabel, she felt sure, and probably he would do it quickly, in the recoil from her. Then she would see his married life and hear how happy Mabel was. She could not escape. Mabel was fond of her, and would be very kind to her from her height of bliss and importance, as betrothed and wife. Nothing would be spared her. Ah, it was a dubious boon her father had granted her !

Next day, Mrs. Mildmay was tired after the dinner-party and spent the greater part of the morning in bed. She got interested in a novel, and when she came down she was too anxious to know how the story ended to take much notice of Gay or require any talk from her, for which the girl was profoundly

thankful. After luncheon, Gay went out for a walk. As she returned, she fell in at the gate with Thornburgh, who told her he was on his way to call on Sophy.

“I am going to town to-morrow,” he added.

“Oh, are you?”

It would be a relief to have him gone; it was worse than she had imagined it would be to meet him.

He informed her that it was very cold, and she agreed, and after a pause, remarked that it was unusually cold for the time of year, and she hoped it would soon be warmer. After that laborious and brilliant effort she had no more to say, and he was dumb too.

She left him with Sophy, and went to take off her walking things. Presently

she received a summons to tea, and was obliged to go to the drawing-room to pour out. Mr. Mildmay had come in, and the talk was brisk. Thornburgh had plenty to say now, and seemed in very good spirits. Sophy accused him of being glad to leave them, and he acknowledged that his joy was great at the prospect of breathing London smoke again. Mr. Mildmay wondered that any rational human being could prefer town to country—especially a man who might follow the delightful round of a country gentleman's duties and pleasures.

In a pause, Jim, who had joined the party, felt called upon to make a contribution to the talk, and uplifted his voice.

“Gay had toothache badly last night. She came to my room and cried ever so.”

I woke up, and I wanted to get her some medicine, but she wouldn't let me."

"Poor Gay!" said Mr. Mildmay, compassionately. "Did it keep you awake long?"

"I didn't sleep very much last night," said Gay, colouring.

"That accounts for your wretched looks to-day," said Sophy. "You are quite white, and your eyes are so heavy. You should have taken something, Gay dear. Is the pain bad now?"

"No, I haven't any pain now, thank you; I am only tired and headachy." She rose. "I think everybody has finished tea. I have something to do before the dressing-bell rings, so I will say good-bye now, Mr. Thornburgh."

She held out her hand with a smile; he touched it as slightly as he could, and

said "Good-bye," without an attempt to smile.

"Gay has not been looking well lately," remarked Sophy, as the door closed behind her stepdaughter.

"Hasn't she?" said Mr. Mildmay, in a tone of surprise.

He had noticed nothing; he did not understand indisposition that did not lay its victim prostrate.

"I don't believe her tooth *is* better," said Jim. "She was crying this afternoon."

"Nonsense, Jim!" said Sophy.

"She was," Jim persisted. "It was after she came in with Cousin Miles—she went up to her room, and I went after her to ask her to mend my whip, and she was sitting so"—putting his elbows on a little table and covering his

face with his hands—"and her eyes were wet."

"This sounds alarming," said Sophy, with a little laugh. "What had you been saying to make her cry, Miles?"

Thornburgh deigned no response.

"Cousin Miles looked very cross when he came in," said Jim, "as cross as he looked when I broke that ugly vase of his."

This was a backhander on Master Jim's part. He had once broken a piece of china which was valuable, not only intrinsically, but because it had been a prized possession of Thornburgh's mother, and he had been deeply offended at the severity with which his freak had been blamed.

"Perhaps Gay has broken something else, and Cousin Miles has scolded her," said Sophy.

"Oh, Cousin Miles, have you?" cried Jim.

"Your mother is joking, Jim," returned his cousin, with a forced laugh.

"Yes, it can't be that; I am sure Gay would not cry for anything Cousin Miles could say or do; it must have been tooth-ache, Jim."

Mr. Mildmay started another subject, and Thornburgh gratefully returned his lead. He departed soon afterwards, refusing a pressing invitation to stay to dinner; and when he was gone, his would-be host lamented this refusal.

"Dear me, James, why did you ask him?" said Sophy, peevishly. "Of course he wouldn't dine *here* his last night."

"Why not? He was always ready enough to dine here at one time."

"Oh yes, that was in Gay's reign. You

don't suppose he came to see me or you?"

"Stuff!" said Mr. Mildmay, a little out of countenance.

He was not a vain man, but he did not much like to be told that his society was less attractive than that of Gay. Female charms are powerful, certainly; but a good dinner and his talk over the wine ought to appeal to the taste of a man of sense.

"Of course he is going to dine at Tarn Hall. Mabel must have his last evening. And I wish her joy of it and of him!" added Sophy, with energetic emphasis.

"Well, well," said Mr. Mildmay, soothingly. "I met Ashton, by the way, and asked him to dinner, and he's coming."

Meanwhile Thornburgh was driving to Tarn Hall to say good-bye, intending to refuse the invitation to dinner which he

would probably receive. His recoil from Gay had not carried him an inch back towards Mabel; his eyes had been too fully opened to the folly of that fancy for him to entertain it again.

The drawing-room that afternoon was as pleasant and homelike in aspect as before; Mrs. Fletcher greeted him cordially; Mabel was in remarkably good looks—there was more animation than usual in her expression, and her blue frock threw up her fair complexion and flaxen hair well. But these things, which had been so soothing and agreeable a week ago, had lost their charm—they were as empty and flavourless as the bills of a concert are the day after the performance. They held out no promise—he wondered that he had ever dreamt they did.

When he entered, Mabel was at the

piano playing an accompaniment, while Mr. Ashton sang.

"Practising for the next parish concert," she explained.

"I wish we could persuade you to do something, Mr. Thornburgh," remarked Mr. Ashton. "Could you not give us a reading or a recitation? You would do it well, I am sure."

"I shall not be here for the performance," replied Thornburgh. "I have to go back to town to-morrow, and must stay there some time."

"Oh, really! I am sorry we cannot have your help."

"Cousin Miles despises these entertainments," said Mabel, with a laugh. "He would not help if he stayed."

Mrs. Fletcher bethought herself of a point on which she wished for Thorn-

burgh's counsel, and while she laid the difficulty before him, Mabel and Mr. Ashton withdrew to the piano again, and fell into animated discourse about the programme.

When he had conscientiously done his best to clear up Mrs. Fletcher's perplexities, Thornburgh departed. He was allowed to go without being asked to dinner; indeed, Mrs. Fletcher sped him with an alacrity which did not escape him, though he was by no means in an observant mood. Mabel's good-bye was spoken more cheerfully than her mother's, and she turned back at once to the important discussion of the programme. Decidedly he was *de trop*.

When Mr. Ashton at last broke off his practice, and hurried away, declaring that he had barely time to dress and go to

Westby Lodge, Mabel walked to the fire and faced round on her mother.

“There!” she cried triumphantly. “Now you see that I am right. He doesn’t care for me at all. He didn’t say a word about coming back soon, or being sorry that he had to go.”

And Mrs. Fletcher by her silence confessed that she agreed with her daughter.

Gay was glad of Mr. Ashton’s presence that evening, for he made it unnecessary for her to exert herself to keep up conversation. While he prosed about parish matters, all she had to do was to appear to listen and to throw in ejaculatory adverbs at convenient distances from one another. His chat flowed past her, making no impression on her mind, till suddenly she was startled into full attention.

It was after dinner that Mr. Ashton remarked—

“By the way, you remember those strange tenants of Kelters?”

“Oh yes, of course! Has anything been found out about them?” asked Mr. Mildmay, in a tone of lively curiosity. “Jackson suspected that they were very shady characters.”

“I haven’t heard anything to that effect. The occupant of the place is dead—he was found dead in the house.”

Mr. Mildmay and his wife exclaimed with the interest naturally excited by such an event in a dull country place, and Mr. Ashton was besought to give some details. But he knew nothing more than the bare fact he had already stated; he could not say what the manner of death had been, nor whether appearances pointed

to murder or to suicide, nor when the coroner's inquest would be held. He had learnt the news just before he started for Westby Lodge, and he had not had time to pursue the theme.

Meanwhile, Gay in a strange double consciousness listened eagerly to every word, and struggled to restrain any show of the agitation into which Mr. Ashton's gossip had thrown her. The thought that was clearest in her mind was that she must make no sign. She must be quiet before Sophy; and that necessity enabled her to present an impassive front, though her brain was in a whirl of horror.

Not till she was safe in her own room for the night did she dare to relax the force she had put upon herself. Then she sank down by the fire, chill with dis-

may, shivering with excitement, and let the thoughts which she had been holding back have their course.

The natural grief for the loss of a parent she did not feel. It was impossible that she should. Her feeling for her father was too far from simple filial affection. She could not even sorrow as she had done some years ago, when death had thrown a veil over his sins and failings, and brought to her mind early days when he had petted her, and she had forgotten how capricious his indulgence had been, and only recalled that he had sometimes shown her fatherly fondness. The remembrance of her feelings then seemed to forbid any revival of them; there was something unreal in mourning again as she had mourned so long ago.

But she was shocked and horrified that

his end had been so sudden, and in such a way. He had died by violence; how had it come about? Could he have committed suicide? He had been greatly depressed that last afternoon, and had said he was weary of existence. But he had often talked of suicide before; again and again she had heard him declare that he was tempted to take his life, and she had never believed that there was any danger of his doing so. It was his way of relieving his irritability; it meant nothing. It was much more probable that he had been murdered; and, as she thought of her last meeting with Pelter, and remembered his odd, excited manner, and his embarrassed, confused speech, she had little doubt that he had committed the deed.

But all other thoughts were presently

lost in anxious speculation as to what result the event would have for Sophy. Would she learn now, after all, the secret that Gay had tried so hard to keep from her? Would the dead man's identity come out at the inquest? It was frightful to think of the pain which the disclosure, made in that open way, would inflict—of what Sophy would suffer from the publicity and the scandal. In one way the matter was not so bad as it had been. Mr. Rush-ton's death left her free, and Mr. Mildmay would marry her at once; but still Sophy would never be the same again after such a shock.

Gay racked her brain in trying to construct the probabilities of discovery. The great danger seemed to be in Pelter—it was not likely that Mr. Rushton had kept any papers that would reveal his real

name—and Gay hoped with all her heart that Pelter might not be found. He would have lost no time in escaping, and might be on board ship already. She felt recklessly indifferent to the interests of justice; it was better that the guilty should escape punishment than that this peaceful home should be wrecked.

The next day passed in a sort of feverish dream. There was something ghastly in the contrast between the commonplace routine which she had to follow, and the agony of suspense and dread which possessed her. She attended to her usual occupations, listened to Sophy's chatter and answered it, complied with Jim's demands, and went to bed worn out in body and mind. But she had no rest. There was an endless night to live through, while her wearied brain climbed the tread-

mill of painful thought. Now and then she fell into a doze, but those snatches of sleep were broken by bad dreams from which she woke in a paroxysm of terror.





CHAPTER III.

THE INQUEST.

“Why do you bend such solemn brows on me?”

* * * * *

It is apparent foul play.”

King John.

THE inquest was held on the morrow.

Gay was thankful that Sophy was going with Jim to spend the day with some friends. They started early, for they had to take a long drive, and when they had gone, Gay betook herself to the schoolroom, glad to be silent and unnoticed. She was walking about the room—the movement was some relief to her irritation

of nerve and brain—when the butler came to tell her that Mr. Mildmay wanted her in the study.

She went at once, supposing that he wished to leave some directions with her before he went out, and hoping to hear that she would be alone at luncheon.

When she entered the study, her eyes fell on Jackson, the policeman, who was standing near the door. At sight of him, Gay started. Had it come out already? A glance at Mr. Mildmay reassured her. He did not appear horrified; he only looked surprised and annoyed.

“Lupton said you wished to speak to me—” said Gay, hesitating.

“Yes, yes, that’s all right. I don’t understand it,” said Mr. Mildmay, in an injured tone. “There must be some mistake; but you are summoned as a witness

to the inquest to-day. It's quite absurd ; you *can't* know anything. Good heavens!"

Gay was staring at him, with wide fixed eyes, white to the lips—an image of terror.

Mr. Mildmay looked at her in amazement, then his face hardened.

"Did you know the man at Kelters?" he asked briefly.

She nodded ; her dry throat and parched lips were incapable of forming a sound.

"You'd better sit down, ma'am," said Jackson, pushing forward a chair.

She sank into it ; then, with a mighty effort, she found her voice.

"Yes, I knew him."

"Well, you have to go to the inquest," said Mr. Mildmay. "All right, Jackson ; it will be at one, you say ? Miss Rushton will be there."

Jackson withdrew, and Mr. Mildmay

regarded Gay half inquiringly, half suspiciously. She did not meet his gaze and did not speak, and after a pause, he said coldly—

“The dog-cart will be round in half an hour. I will drive you to the place.”

She murmured a faint mechanical “Thank you,” and left him. When the cart came to the door, she was ready, and they started at once.

Mr. Mildmay drove in silence, with an expression of gloomy displeasure, which sat oddly on his usually cheerful visage. It aggrieved him that Gay had any acquaintance with a person who had been considered disreputable in the neighbourhood, and that she had carried on underhand intercourse with him; and it disgusted him deeply that a member of his family should be mixed up in this inquiry. He

hated publicity for a woman, especially for a young woman, and he was angry with Gay for causing the gossip which would follow this experience of hers. All the discreditable things that he had ever heard of her father rushed into his mind, and he felt that she was proving herself worthy of her parentage.

Gay was vaguely conscious of his hostile attitude, but it made no impression on her at that moment. She could think of nothing but the ordeal which lay before her, and of the way in which she must undergo it. The emergency had stimulated her energies. Her head was clear, her perceptions were acute, and as she was driven she pondered what she would say.

Mr. Mildmay looked at her now and then, and his disgust was deepened by

her expression of businesslike cogitation. If she had been fluttering and hysterical, overcome by nervousness at the prospect of giving evidence, such feminine alarms would have softened him towards her. But this perfect composure, this deliberate preparation! She was much too cool a hand.

The inquest was held at the chief inn in St. Austin's. Gay was conducted to a little parlour to wait till she was called, and Mr. Mildmay was admitted to the room in which the inquiry was to be conducted.

The first witness was a lad, employed by Mr. Helm, who related that he had gone in the course of his rounds on Tuesday to ask for orders at Kelters. He had knocked for some time, but nobody answered, and at last he had tried the door, found it unlocked, and walked

in. Finding no one in the back regions, he had supposed that the occupants were gone, and thought he would like to have a look at the other rooms. In one of the sitting-rooms he had found Mr. Brown, lying on a couch, dead, with a wound in his head, and in great alarm he had rushed away, driven to the village, and given notice to the policeman. He didn't touch anything in the room—he was too frightened.

The policeman deposed to finding the dead body and examining the room. A revolver was lying on the floor beside the body, and there were spots of blood on the couch and floor. He had found on the ash-pan under the grate a lady's kid glove, which had apparently been thrown on the fire, and had fallen short. It was stained with blood.

The doctor had examined the body, and he described the wound which had caused death. It was possible that it had been self-inflicted.

Then Gay was summoned. She wore an air of steady self-possession when she appeared, and her voice was firm as she replied to the questions put to her. She had known the deceased. He had been a friend of her father's in America, and had sought her out on that account. She had understood that his name was Brown. She had occasionally seen him since he had come to Kelters. She had seen him last Sunday, and then he had talked of going away in a few days. He had seemed in very low spirits, and said he was tired of life. She had not seen him since.

“ You have not seen him since Sunday ? ”

“No,” she replied clearly.

“Was the deceased’s mind affected?”

“No, not at all.”

He had scarcely ever spoken of his life in America, and she knew nothing of it. She understood that he had no settled home. She believed that he had no relations to whom his death should be communicated—he was quite alone in the world.

She was asked if the glove was hers, and she replied in the affirmative.

Then her evidence was at an end, and with a great sensation of relief she withdrew. She had got through easily, after all. Not a faltering of tone or eye, not a hesitation had put them on the track of her secret. Sophy might be saved yet. If Pelter was not taken—and he had had time to escape—all would be well. The

determination to protect Sophy's peace ruled all her mind then. She would defend her at any cost, at any risk.

Meanwhile, another witness had appeared. Susan, flushed and excited, in all the importance of one who has an effective and prominent part to play, was brought forward and sworn, and proceeded to tell her tale in the diffuse, inconsequent fashion of her class.

She lived half a mile from Kelters, and had worked at that house for the last three weeks. She was hired for the morning only, but on Monday last she had been at the house all day because the man was away on business. She had waited on Mr. Brown on Monday—he had seemed low and poorly, but he was quite right in his mind. He talked as rational as could be. He was alive when

she went home at eight o'clock. After she had gone home she saw Miss Rushton go along towards Kelvers. She kept on the watch, and after a while Miss Rushton came back, walking very fast, with a little parcel in her hand. She could not say exactly how long it was before Miss Rushton came back—it would be about an hour. She was quite sure it was Miss Rushton that went by—it was a moonlight night, and she was at the garden gate, near enough to see her distinctly. She couldn't be mistaken, and she described Miss Rushton's dress with minute accuracy. She noticed her particularly, because it seemed strange for a young lady to be out alone at that time so far from home, and she was surprised that she should be going to Kelvers because, after the talk she (Susan) had

chanced to overhear on the day before, she thought Miss Rushton would have stayed away a bit. She and Mr. Brown had "had words" then.

"What did you hear?"

"He said that she wanted him out of the way, and would be glad to hear he was dead," repeated Susan, with relish; "and she said she was tired of it."

They were talking about going away—Miss Rushton seemed to want him to go and asked him when he would; and there was something about a young man that Miss Rushton was fond of. Mr. Brown wanted her to go away with him, and said she was crying because of leaving this gentleman, and he stood in their way. Being asked how she came to be in the house at that hour and to hear so much of a private conversation, Susan

glibly replied that she had slipped in in the afternoon to do a bit of work which she had forgotten in the morning, and as she was busy in a room which opened into Mr. Brown's sitting-room and the door was unlatched, she could hear distinctly.

Mr. Pelter, she continued, had said afterwards that it was only one of Mr. Brown's delusions that Miss Rushton would go with him, but she didn't believe Mr Pelter. She was sure, from what she had seen, that the poor gentleman wasn't out of his head; he spoke as quiet and sensible as Susan herself could do, and was very civil in his manner. Mr. Pelter told her that Mr. Brown was an old friend of Miss Rushton's father, and she went to see him sometimes for her father's sake.

Susan had gone to the house on Tues-

day and set to work as usual. She did not go into the front part of the house, she was waiting till Mr. Brown should ring for his breakfast, which he always had in bed. She was upstairs, cleaning a room, when the grocer's boy came, and she did not hear him knock. She had no idea that there was anything wrong, and the first she knew of what had happened was what she heard from the boy, whom she met as he was going out of the house. She was very glad that he had gone into the room, for she didn't know what she should have done, if she——

Susan had been allowed to be irrelevant when she gave details about those concerned in the affair ; but nobody felt any curiosity as to her feelings, and she was silenced on that head, and asked what

she knew about Pelter's movements. He had gone away on Monday afternoon—she had seen him go, and had seen nothing of him since. He told her he should be away two days.

Susan's public appearance was over, and the coroner began to sum up the evidence that had been heard.





CHAPTER IV.

“HE DIED LONG AGO.”

“Sie machten ein grosses Wesen
Und schüttelten kläglich das Haupt.”

HEINE.

“**H** DON'T believe it,” cried the land-
lady of the White Horse.

“It's true, I do assure you, Mrs. Woodhouse,” returned Mr. Helm, who had dropped in to gather news, and hastened to the landlady's private parlour to share his spoil with her. “‘Wilful murder’—that's the verdict—and Miss Rushton will be arrested at once.”

“I never heard of such nonsense! As

if a young lady like that would ever murder anybody! I've no opinion of juries," cried Mrs. Woodhouse, contemptuously. "Twelve fools won't be a bit wiser than one fool; they will be worse when they get together, for one'll egg the other on."

"They've got to go by the evidence, you know," said Mr. Helm, who had more respect than the landlady for British institutions. "And there's no denying that it looks very queer for Miss Rushton."

"Did you say they were going to arrest her here?" interrupted the other.

"Of course. Jackson will take her off at once."

"I shall take some wine up to her, poor young thing!" said Mrs. Woodhouse, rising in haste. "She'll need something to keep her up in such trouble. Wilful

murder, indeed! I should like to give that jury a piece of my mind! Miss Rushton shan't go away till she has had something."

The landlady hastened on her benevolent errand to the room where Gay had waited. She knocked and entered at once, with an air of firm purpose, which was intended to show Jackson that she would resist any attempt on his part to interfere with her ministrations to his prisoner.

Gay was sitting on a little horsehair couch, looking with an expression of stunned amazement at Jackson, who was reading the warrant in a mumbling voice. That worthy was in a painful confusion of feeling. The professional man in him was moved to natural satisfaction by the excitement of unusual importance—it is

seldom that a country policeman has to deal with a case of wilful murder; and this case was specially interesting on account of its circumstances and the good position of the accused. But, as a private man, he was sadly embarrassed at having to take Miss Rushton in charge; he respected her as a member of Mr. Mildmay's family, and he liked her as a pleasant-mannered young lady. The manner in which he went through the formalities of making an arrest was thus shorn of some of its rightful dignity.

Mr. Mildmay was standing a little apart, with a heavy frown on his brow.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Mrs. Woodhouse, addressing him when the reading came to an end; "I took the liberty of bringing Miss Rushton a glass of wine. I'm sure she must need it."

“Thank you, Mrs. Woodhouse ; yes, she had better have some,” he replied, with a stiffness which was not lost upon the landlady.

“He’s turned against her,” she thought indignantly, and was fired to warmer championship of Gay on that account.

“Try and drink some, ma’am,” she said, carefully speaking with greater deference than usual ; “it will do you good.”

Gay accepted the offered glass and drank a little, moving in a mechanical way, as if she was not conscious of what she was doing. Mrs. Woodhouse left the room, and Mr. Mildmay followed her to order that a close carriage should be got ready at once. It was soon at the door. Mr. Mildmay put Gay into it ; the policeman took his place on the box, and they drove off.

"Such a shame!" cried Mrs. Woodhouse, who had watched the departure, carefully hidden behind a curtain. "If I'd been on the jury, I know this would never have happened. I declare I could have cried to see the poor young lady—she looked as if she couldn't take the thing in."

"Well, of course, one naturally feels sorry for a young lady in such a position," said Mr. Helm; "but still, appearances are against her."

He had improved the time since Mrs. Woodhouse left him by talking over the case further with a jurymen or two; and now, with the keen enjoyment in giving information which men always display, he went through the evidence as he had heard it.

"If she knows nothing about it, why did she swear a lie? She said she never

saw him after Sunday, and it's certain she was there on Monday night."

"I'm not going to take the word of Susan Thwaite against Miss Rushton's," protested Mrs. Woodhouse, scornfully. "If Miss Rushton says she didn't see him on Monday, I suppose she didn't see him. She might go there, and yet not see him."

"Why didn't she say so, then? It looks as if she knew something and wanted to hide it. And then there was her glove—how did it get stained with blood if she wasn't there on Monday, and who tried to burn it? It looks black."

"I should say that the man shot himself, or that the servant did it," said Mrs. Woodhouse. "What's become of him? He must have run away—*that* looks black, if you like."

"According to Susan Thwaite's account,

he was away when it happened. He went off on Monday, and said he should be away two days."

"But we aren't obliged to believe he did as he said. He could come back in the night, I suppose?" said Mrs. Woodhouse, snappishly. "That's been the way of it—he sneaked back quietly and murdered his master, and Miss Rushton knew as much of it as you did, Mr. Helm."

"Very likely the man had a hand in it," agreed Mr. Helm, "but it does look as though Miss Rushton had been mixed up in it too. You see she seems to have had a motive—that's a very important point. She told Mr. Brown that she was tired of it, and wished he was out of the way."

"Susan Thwaite says she said so,"

remarked Mrs. Woodhouse, drily. "I don't pin much faith on folks that aren't ashamed to confess they've been listening to talk that wasn't meant for them to hear. It's no good talking to *me*, Mr. Helm—nothing would ever make me believe such a thing of anybody that has as good a heart as Miss Rushton has. Look how kind she has always been to Master Jim—his own mother couldn't be better to him, and how fond he seems of her."

"Well, anyhow you look at it, it's a queer business," remarked Mr. Helm. "I wonder who this Mr. Brown was, and what Miss Rushton had to do with him? She went to see him secretly. They say Mr. Mildmay didn't seem even to know that she knew him. And to go late at night—it was an odd thing for a young lady to do!"

"I don't see any harm in her going to see an old friend of her father's; he wasn't a young man. Very likely he was a relation that she didn't like to own; they say her father was a bad sort, and there might be more like him in the family."

"I heard that he wanted her to go away with him."

"Ay; he must have been a relation—that's it, you may depend."

"Well, but if he was only a relation, she wouldn't be obliged to go away with him; and she seems to have felt that she must go. It really looks as if she had been married on the sly to the man."

"Well, I never! What will you say next about her, Mr. Helm?"

"Well," persisted Mr. Helm, "it's only what plenty will think."

Sophy returned home late in the afternoon. When Mr. Mildmay saw the carriage approaching, he went to the door to meet her. She alighted, placid and smiling, and greeted him gaily. She was not an observant person, and did not notice his unusual gravity.

"I'm glad you have come in," she said. "I was afraid you would be out, and I have lots to tell you. It has been quite a pleasant day—there were three or four visitors beside myself at luncheon. The Ormes are going to give a dinner-party the week after next."

"Yes, dear. Come into the study, will you? I want to speak to you."

Sophy followed across the hall, still prattling about the day's pleasure.

"Go up to nurse, Jim," said Mr. Mildmay, turning to the child.

"I'm going to Gay," said Jim. "I want her."

"She is out. Go to nurse at once, and stay with her, do you hear?"—irritably.

Jim began to mount the stairs with a slow step and a sulky expression.

"When will Gay be back?" he asked.

But the study door was shut, and Mr. Mildmay addressed himself to the task of breaking the news to his wife. It was not an easy task to perform. Sophy was thunderstruck by his tale, and he had to repeat it more than once.

When at last she grasped the fact that Gay was in prison on suspicion of having been concerned in a murder, she gave way to a burst of wild distress and childish anger against those who suspected her. It was monstrous—absurd—impossible! Gay knew nothing of the person that had

been at Kelvers—how should she? She had never had anything to do with him. It was too silly to suppose that she could be mixed up with such horrid things!

“I am afraid there can be no doubt that she knew him, Sophy,” said Mr. Mildmay. “She confessed herself that she did, and that she had gone to see him—I heard her.”

“Gay said so?”

“She did, indeed. She seems to have been acting in a way altogether unlike what one would have expected. She has kept up a secret acquaintance with this man—even visiting him late at night. We have been quite mistaken in her.”

“I don’t believe she ever went late at night,” cried Sophy.

“She was seen doing it, dear. Have you any idea who the man could be?”

Had she any relations that she knew intimately?"

"No, indeed! Her father had quarrelled with all his people and his first wife's people long before I saw him, and he never had anything to do with them. Gay didn't even know what relations she had—she has told me so."

"And she had no friend in London that you know of?"

"She never had a man friend,"—very decidedly.

"Did you know all about her acquaintances?"

"Of course I did. I knew all about her. She isn't the kind of girl to have acquaintances secretly."

"I fear—I fear that you have been grievously deceived in her, Sophy. Unfortunately, it is certain that she has had

one acquaintance that you did not know of, and she has kept him up here. Her behaviour has been disgraceful—unpardonable.”

“Oh, James, how can you say such things?”

“What else can I say? She has deceived you and me shamefully.”

“But she couldn’t,” declared Sophy. “Gay couldn’t behave so badly. There must be some mistake.”

“She says herself that she has behaved in this way,” insisted Mr. Mildmay.

“I don’t understand it,”—still sceptically. Facts are stubborn, but Sophy’s faith in Gay was a good deal more stubborn. “It is quite impossible. I am sure that she could explain it. She may have gone that way and spoken to the man by chance, but there couldn’t have been any-

thing else. Why didn't you ask her to clear it up?"

"I did, and she would not say a word. I asked her who the man was, and she would not answer."

"It is very strange. She knew nobody——"

"She must have kept you in the dark all along, dear. It wouldn't be difficult for a girl of that type to deceive an innocent, unsuspecting little woman like you."

"Oh, you know nothing about Gay," cried Sophy, impatiently. "You think her deceitful and horrid, and that sort of thing isn't in her. There must be some horrible, dreadful mistake. What was the man like—did you hear?"

Mr. Mildmay repeated the description he had heard. He was probably somewhere in his forties, but young-looking

for his age. He was tall and dark, and must have been handsome, and there was a scar right across the back of his left hand.

Sophy gave a start.

"Tall and dark, did you say?"

"Yes; he was quite six feet."

"And—and what about his hand?"

"There was a scar across the back of it, shaped like a V."

"Shaped like a V? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. Do you remember anybody with such a scar?"

Sophy did not answer for a moment. She had suddenly become very pale and still.

"I don't know," she said hurriedly.

"I—I saw somebody with one—a long time ago. It can't be the same person—he is dead. He died long ago."

"Who was he?"

"Oh, nobody particular! It couldn't be this man, James, unless"—with a faint hysterical laugh—"he was a ghost. You asked Gay who he was?"

"Yes; I told you so."

"And—what did she say?"

"She said nothing at all—she was obstinately silent."

Sophy was silent again for a little time.

"Gay knew him and went to see him, and said nothing about it," she said at last, in a low tone, with a look of growing dread. "Oh, James, I must see Gay! Can't I go at once? Is there a train?"

"My dear, you cannot go to-night. You could not see Gay if you did."

"When can I go? Can you get me in to-morrow? I must see her."

“Well, perhaps you might go to-morrow, if you are equal to it. But I can’t have you making yourself ill with running after Gay.”

“Oh, I *must* see her,” reiterated Sophy, and she fell into a passion of weeping which soon developed into an attack of strong hysterics.

Next day she said nothing of her wish to go to Castleton. She was too ill to leave her bed, and she lay in a feverish stupor, paying no attention to any one that approached her. Even her husband could not rouse her, and the disgust which he already felt about Gay was deepened by this result of her misconduct. Sophy was fretting herself into a fever on account of that worthless girl.





CHAPTER V.

A FOOLISH FANCY.

“Que diable allait-(elle) faire dans cette galère?”

“Whate’er you think, good words, I think, were best.”

King John.

QN the evening after the inquest, Mr. Mildmay wrote about the events of the day to Thornburgh. Fortunately for his friendship for his cousin, he never knew how that important letter was treated. It was posted the next day, and duly delivered at its address on Saturday morning; but when Thornburgh turned over his letters he threw aside, unopened, the envelope directed in Mr.

Mildmay's hand. He expected nothing of more importance than a brief note about some small business matter. He could attend to that later; he was in no mood for hearing of anything connected with Westby Lodge.

Some other letters were neglected in the same way; and those that Thornburgh did open were read with little attention. Ordinary life had no interest for him just then; he was sick at heart and miserable. There was only one subject that did seem worth thinking of, and that was so full of pain that he was constantly making resolutions to dismiss it from his mind.

But he was not capable of carrying out his resolutions; thoughts of Gay possessed him, and would not be banished. When he had turned from her on Sunday, anger, and his conviction of her unworthi-

ness, had blunted his pain at the time. Now those stimulants did not help him. He saw that she was blameworthy. Unquestionably she ought to have treated him very differently if she was not free to accept him; she had trifled with him. But even the certainty that she had been guilty of that great offence could not rouse befitting indignation within him. The flame of resentment burnt feebly, flickered, and went out, as often as he lit it; he could not persist in hard thoughts of her, for he knew that she loved him.

That fact dwarfed everything else that he knew about her. When he went over their last talk, he did not recall her rejection half so often as he remembered that she had been in his arms and he had kissed her. That moment had bound him to her and quickened his love with new

passion. It was impossible to keep up anger with the memory of her mute surrender thrilling him. He could only long and long for the bliss she had denied him. It was maddening to hold such exquisite happiness in one's very hand merely to have it snatched away.

Thornburgh passed that day as he had passed every day since he came to town, dragging through the hours with listless distaste for all they brought him. He attempted to do some work, and, by dint of severe effort, spun out a few paragraphs, which, when he read them over, were so flabby and commonplace that he shuddered, and made haste to fling the paper into the fire. It was simply awful to find himself capable of such inanities, and such lumbering pointless sentences. He took a long walk in the afternoon, and dined at a

restaurant instead of his club, that he might not be bored by having to talk to anybody; he found solitude dreary, but society was drearier. But he was presently accosted by a young acquaintance, who expressed delight at meeting him and showed an ill-timed wish to enjoy his companionship. He proposed that they should go to the play together; he had two stalls at the Criterion that evening, which were to have been occupied by him and his brother, but the brother was seedy.

“Got a chill, afraid he’s in for influenza, and has taken to his bed,” explained young Herbert. “It’s lucky I’ve met you; you’ll go with me, won’t you? It’s twice the fun going with somebody who can laugh with one.”

Mr. Herbert’s fun was not doubled that evening; his companion regarded the stage

with an air of gloom which would have been in place if the play had been by Ibsen, and withdrew before the performance came to an end.

On his return, the sight of his unread letters reminded Thornburgh of the duty he had shirked that morning; and when he had begun smoking he turned his attention to his ill-treated correspondents. Mr. Mildmay came last. Thornburgh began his letter with a languid wonder as to what he could be writing about to fill two sheets. When he came to the second sentence, all languor left him, and he read breathlessly to the end.

But he only gained a confused idea of what had happened. Mr. Mildmay did not attempt a clear and complete narrative, but took it for granted that his cousin had learnt the facts from the papers. Thorn-

burgh had seen nothing; he had read very little in the newspapers since he came to town, and he hastily turned over the journals for the last few days. In a yesterday's evening paper he found a brief account of the inquest. He read it twice. It was not easy to decipher it, for Gay's name printed there seemed to hurt his eyes and dim their sight. Then he looked up the Sunday trains in Bradshaw. He must go north at once; that was his first unhesitating thought. Gay in trouble summoned him with an imperious command. He must do what he could to help her.

Mr. Mildmay was sitting alone in his study on Sunday evening when Thornburgh was shown in.

"Miles, my dear fellow, I'm very glad

to see you!" cried Mr. Mildmay, wringing his hand. "This is good of you; we need our friends at such a time," he went on, when he had been assured that Thornburgh had dined. "It will be a comfort to Sophy to see you; she always regards you as a brother. This is a terrible thing for her."

Thornburgh was tingling with impatience to hear something about Gay, but he constrained himself to ask how Sophy was.

"She is quite upset," said Mr. Mildmay, looking distressed and worried. "She takes it awfully to heart. She is very fond of Gay, of course, and it is a most shocking position for the girl."

"Naturally Sophy must feel it."

"Yes, yes; she is so affectionate."

But Mr. Mildmay's tone did not express

assured faith in this explanation. Sophy's state of mind perplexed him woefully.

"It is a dreadful thing for Miss Rush-ton," said Thornburgh.

Mr. Mildmay shook his head with an air of gloomy severity.

"It is indeed," he briefly returned.

"Do you know how she is?"

"I haven't heard anything about her health. I haven't seen her since she was arrested on Thursday. I don't mean to see her again," said Mr. Mildmay, firmly. "I cannot forgive her for the way in which she behaved while she was under my roof. I have done with her."

"But surely you will do what you can for her at present? She must be defended."

"Oh yes, yes; I have seen to that. I have engaged a lawyer for her. But

I certainly shall not speak to her again. Why, Miles, she has been paying clandestine visits to that man at Kelters all the time he was there. I suppose he came to the place only to be near her, and she pretended to know nothing, and looked quite innocent when we talked about him."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know—some low fellow, with a shady record, that she had picked up."

"What was he to her? Did she tell you?"

"No; she said nothing about him. She confessed, when I asked her, that she had gone to see him, but that was all. When I asked who he was, she made no answer."

"I heard somebody at the station say she was married to him," said Thorn-

burgh, slowly ; “ but that must have been merely gossip.”

“ It is the general opinion, and of course it is the most natural thing to think. She must have been married to him, or—— ”

“ Well ? ” impatiently.

“ Or not married,” said Mr. Mildmay.

The words were nothing, the expression gave them point.

“ Good heavens, Miles, what is the matter ? ” as he saw the white wrath in the other’s face.

“ You can say *that* about her ? You must know that it is a vile slander,” cried Thornburgh, vehemently.

Mr. Mildmay was angry at being so roughly addressed, but his desire for peace was stronger than his pugnacity at that moment, and he curbed his tongue.

An open quarrel with his cousin would be very uncomfortable ; particularly at that juncture, when he was yearning for a male companion and confidant. And allowance must be made for Miles, poor fellow, who evidently had not quite got over his old fancy for Gay, and could not be blamed for resenting such a speech about her.

“Well, well ; I went too far,” he said soothingly. “I ought not to have said so much. But the whole business is so worrying that one gets irritated. No doubt she was married to him ; she would never have gone late at night to see him as she did, if she was not.”

“He may have been a relation.”

“I don’t think so. Sophy doesn’t seem to have heard of any relations that Gay knew. The father must have been

dropped by his family at an early stage in his career. Gay must have got entangled in some way with this man when she was singing in London—an unprotected girl was sure to make undesirable friends.”

“But what was the man’s age?” asked Thornburgh, sharply.

He had always assumed that Gay’s mysterious acquaintance was an elderly married man whom she could visit with perfect propriety. Not in his hardest thoughts had he accused her of levity or anything unbecoming. Even when he warned her that she might bring herself into difficulties by her clandestine visits to Kelvers, he had not dreamt that slander could run so wild about her.

“Age?—oh, I don’t know exactly; he was a middle-aged man, the doctor said,

looking younger than he probably was; a man that had been decidedly handsome once."

Thornburgh regarded the fire gloomily, wondering what the truth was about the man. Gay had told him that she was not married; but, unfortunately, her word had lost its value with him. She might have felt obliged to conceal her real position. And with a bitter pang he felt that at the pass things were it would be better if she had deceived him on this point.

"It is frightful to think what she has brought upon herself—simply frightful," said Mr. Mildmay, after a pause.

"She must be set free directly," said Thornburgh. "The coroner's jury must have been fools to give such a verdict. It is simply preposterous to suppose that she could shoot a man."

“Appearances are very much against her. They have discovered a piece of damaging evidence since the inquest. There was no money in the house, except a little loose cash in the man’s pocket, but in his desk there was a list of the numbers of some bank-notes, and a great many of those notes were found in her possession.”

“He must have given them to her,” said Thornburgh, quietly, feeling the while that he was sinking deeper in doubt and perplexity. Who could the man be from whom she would accept money?

“She says that she was going on Monday night to Kelvers, but the man-servant met her and gave her a packet of notes, saying that his master had gone and left that for her. It is a lame story, and not a bit like the truth; she would have been better advised not to tell it.”

“That man must have committed the murder.”

“I suppose he must ; it seems incredible that Gay should be guilty. But upon my word, Miles, I scarcely know what to believe ; her conduct has been so suspicious. If you had seen her face when she heard she was to be a witness at the inquest—I never saw anybody look so frightened in all my life ; she was petrified with fear. She must have known something, I feel sure. Ashton spoke of the death of the man at Kelvers before her on Tuesday. If one is to believe her story, it was news to her, but she took it like a stone ; it might have had nothing to do with her. She was prepared to hear it, I fear. It looks at least uncommonly as if she had been an accessary after the fact. It will go dreadfully against

her that she said nothing at the inquest about seeing the man on Monday—she kept dead silence about it, although she must have known that it was an important piece of information. Evidently she had her reasons for trying to shield this fellow.”

There was a silence. Thornburgh was pondering with consternation what Mr. Mildmay had said. He had not been alarmed on Gay's account before—the charge of murder was too wildly impossible to be maintained on further investigation. But there was an ugly probability about this lesser accusation.

A maid entered with a message. Her mistress begged that Mr. Thornburgh would come upstairs ; she wished to speak to him.

Thornburgh followed to a little sitting-room where Sophy sat in a big chair by

the fire. She looked ill; the hand she held out was hot, and her eyes had a scared, bewildered expression.

"I am sorry to see you so unwell, Sophy," said her cousin, gently.

"Isn't it dreadful, Miles? Isn't it dreadful?"

"You must not distress yourself too much."

"I can't help it. I *must* distress myself"—petulantly. "I am frightened to death—— But you don't understand——"

"Yes, I do. Of course you are anxious about Gay; but you must be hopeful. She would tell you so, if she were here."

"I want to see Gay. But I can't go—I am too ill, and I daren't go. Miles, will you do something for me?"

"Anything I can."

“Will you?”—eagerly. “You have always been so kind, Miles. Will you go and see Gay for me? You will not mind very much?— Nobody will think that you go because you like her at all, you know; that is all an old story. I suppose you are disgusted and angry with her like James—he is very hard on her.”

“I am very sorry for her,” was all Thornburgh could say.

He was disgusted in a way; every fibre in him thrilled with repugnance at the thought of the hideous coil in which Gay was entangled. He would gladly have fought any one that spoke lightly of her, if that rough-and-ready mode of clearing a lady's fame were practised now; but he was wroth with her for having brought herself into such a plight. Yet through all his anger he loved her.

“You are as angry as James,” said Sophy, in a disappointed tone; “and he says he will never see her again. But, Miles” —lowering her voice— “you must not believe bad things about her. Gay could never, never do anything that wasn’t nice. I *know* she couldn’t. James is quite wrong about her.”

“I do not believe bad things about her”—curtly. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to go and see her, and ask her who that man was. Tell her I want to know, and she must tell me—— I can’t bear not to know—— I am so afraid—— Will you?”

“If you wish it.”

He was half reluctant, half eager to see Gay again.

“Oh, thank you, Miles, thank you!

And you will see her as soon as you can, and come back and tell me at once?"

"Yes, certainly. Have you any idea who he was?" asked Thornburgh.

Sophy looked at him with a piteous terror in her eyes, and turned away with a shiver.

"I—I—have a fancy—— It *can't* be true, I know; it is quite impossible; but I can't get it out of my head, and it won't let me sleep at night. It is quite silly—— Plenty of people have a scar on the left hand, and are dark and tall, but—— Oh, Miles, find out as soon as you can! I shall go mad, if I don't hear soon; I can't bear the suspense."

"But, Sophy, who are you afraid the man was?" said her cousin, utterly mystified by her fear and agitation.

She shivered again.

"I can't tell you. It couldn't really be him," she said, in a tone of eager protest. "I don't see how it could, when I think about it, but I cannot get rid of the fancy."

Suddenly Thornburgh saw what the fancy was.

"You think that it was Gay's——" he said, and stopped, for Sophy put out her hand with a gesture of entreaty for silence.

"Hush!" she whispered. "Don't say it, Miles. It can't be true, can it? He was dead—dead—he couldn't come back. It is foolish to think such things; but I always used to have foolish notions, and I am not well. Hearing about Gay gave me such a shock. Oh, Miles, he couldn't come back! You quite believed that he was dead, didn't you? You saw the papers——"

Thornburgh did not answer. He had not listened to her; his mind was concentrated on this new theory of the situation.

"You saw the papers," repeated Sophy, querulously, as he did not speak.

He started, and his laggard brain received the sense of the words which he had heard without attention.

"Yes, yes; of course I saw them."

"And you said it was all right?"

"Certainly it seemed to be so," said Thornburgh, recalling the papers which he had examined before Sophy's second marriage. The evidence of her first husband's death had seemed satisfactory then.

"He must have been dead; you thought he was."

"Yes, I did; I had no doubt of it."

But looking back now, he perceived that the account of Mr. Rushton's death and burial might have been an invention.

He rose hastily.

"Sophy, you must not agitate yourself in this way; you will be ill," he said. "I will see Gay as soon as I possibly can to-morrow, and let you know without delay what she tells me."

"Don't tell James what you are going for," said Sophy, beseechingly. "I couldn't bear him to know."

"It would be kinder if you told him; he is very anxious about you."

"Oh no, no; I couldn't! I was too frightened to speak of it. I couldn't tell anybody. You guessed it. Oh, if it is true, I don't know how I shall bear to have him told!"

"Told what?" said a voice in the back-

ground, and Sophy turned with a faint shriek to see Mr. Mildmay, who had come in unheard by the occupants of the room in their excitement, and caught the last words. "If there is anything more to hear about Gay you had better tell me at once, Sophy," went on the intruder, advancing. "My dear, my dear, why will you worry yourself by trying to shield her? Give her up; it is a hopeless business. She doesn't deserve that you should take her troubles to heart."

Sophy had fallen back in her chair and covered her face with her hands. She sobbed faintly, but did not speak.

"Sophy has been giving me a commission to Miss Rushton," said Thornburgh.

"She oughtn't to have asked you any such thing," said Mr. Mildmay, bluntly. "The less any of our family have to do

with her the better. You will only expose yourself to unpleasant gossip."

"I am quite indifferent to the gossip."

"But what is this I have not been told?" persisted the other, returning to the point of interest for himself.

"You tell him, Miles," cried Sophy, rising hurriedly; "I can't. I am going away. Yes, tell him. He had better know now."





CHAPTER VI.

“I AM IN LOVE WITH HER.”

“All has gone wrong ;
But I meant right, God knows.”

Colombe's Birthday.

THE next day Gay was sitting in her prison. It was the fourth day since she had entered that room, and it seemed sometimes as if she had lived years there, in the grip of fear and suspense. She had been amazed, when she heard of the suspicion that had fallen upon her ; it had been inconceivable that she should be accused of murder and arrested. But her amazement had worn off long ago ; she

was quite familiar with the position now, and found nothing strange in being shut up, face to face with danger.

She was doing nothing. There were books and writing materials on the table beside her; but she could not read, and she had nothing to write. She was thinking of her plight, going mechanically over and over the round of thoughts which filled her brain to the exclusion of all others. Sometimes she grew very weary of the constant repetition of ideas and questions; but she had no power to drive them away. All her life had narrowed to this one subject. There was nothing else that could be considered but how she had reached "the heart o' the labyrinth," and how she was to get out of it.

The most pressing practical difficulty was, whether or no to confess her relation-

ship to the dead man. At first she had felt that all must be told; it would be seen that it was outrageous to suppose she could murder her own father. But she would be silent a little longer; she could not be set free directly, and she shrank from destroying Sophy's peace. So she kept her secret; and then she began to doubt whether it would do her any good if she revealed it. Appearances were altogether against her. The fact she had kept back could not destroy the weight of the evidence, if it were believed; and it seemed to her that such a story might be regarded merely as an invention to save herself from danger and from scandal. She did not now belong to the people that are believed on their mere affirmation. Her only chance of gaining credence would have been to speak out at the inquest; it was too late now.

She was debating the question in maddening uncertainty, when the door was unlocked and a visitor was ushered in.

Gay started to her feet when she saw Thornburgh, and drew back a few steps. She had not tasted her full humiliation till then. He paused for a moment in consternation. The few days which had passed since their last meeting had changed her woefully. She was as thin and worn as if she had had a severe illness, and her dark-ringed eyes had the troubled gaze of a hunted creature.

A hot painful flush dyed her cheeks, as he looked at her, and half turning away with a shrinking gesture, she said—

“Why have you come *here*? Do you want to tell me how wrong I have been,

and how ashamed you are of knowing me?"

"Gay!" was all he could reply in his surprise at such a reception.

"Mr. Mildmay made me understand that, and I know it quite well without being told. I am a disgrace to all my respectable acquaintances—oh, I know, I know! You needn't look grave, and shocked, and horrified."

Her voice died away in a hoarse murmur, and she sank into her chair.

"You do not understand. Am I a brute that I should add to your troubles?"

"You do add to them when you come, for I can see—I know what you think. You are sorry for me, but—— Oh, I wish you would leave me in peace," she cried, covering her face. "I cannot bear to be seen here; it is too shameful."

"There is nothing shameful to you in it. There has been a mistake—that is all. If I seemed shocked and horrified just now, it was only because you look so ill. You ought to have a doctor."

"What good could a doctor do? He cannot put things right for me."

"That will be done very soon—you can't be kept here on such a ridiculous charge. I have come to you from Sophy," he went on. "She is not well enough to come herself, and she begged me to be her messenger. She is very anxious to know who it was that lived at Kelvers. Something has roused her suspicions as to his identity, and she entreats you to tell her his name."

He paused ; but Gay was silent.

"She will be wretched until she knows the truth. Gay, you *must* speak out ;

matters are too serious for anything else. It will be sheer madness if you keep your secret now out of generosity to Sophy—you must not attempt it. Tell me. He was your father?" he added abruptly, challenging her.

"Yes," she said simply. "Has Sophy guessed it?"

"Oh, Gay, forgive me, forgive me!" cried Thornburgh, forgetting Sophy and every one else.

"Forgive you?"—in a bewildered tone.

"*That* was your secret, and you let me blame you, and I never guessed that you were a heroine. How did you bear it all alone?"

"I had to bear it. I could not let Sophy know; it would have been enough to kill her to find out such a thing."

"And you would have held your

tongue for Sophy's sake, no matter what came to yourself?" he said angrily. "Don't you understand that this fact will help to clear you? If it had been known at first, the jury——"

He broke off, ashamed of his own clumsiness. It is an ungracious office to point out to our neighbour that his troubles are of his own manufacture; Gay had enough to endure without any aggravation of her suffering.

"Yes, I see now that I blundered," she said. "But at the inquest I only thought of keeping it secret for Sophy's sake. I never dreamt that they would suspect me; and I was too much startled to say anything when I was arrested. Then I did not know what to do; I thought that they would not believe my account, and it would do me no good to speak, and it

seemed cruel to disturb Sophy for nothing. I was at my wits' end. I could not see my way at all."

"Oh, it would have ended in your bearing the worst that came in heroic—idiotic silence!" he said vehemently. "You would have sacrificed yourself for Sophy. Fortunately that is prevented. Now, I want you to tell me all you know about this business. Tell me the whole story from beginning to end. When did you first hear that your father was alive?"

She did as he asked, telling her tale clearly and simply. Now and then he put a question, but for the most part he listened in silence, his heart full of yearning pity for her and rage against himself that he had so utterly misjudged her.

"I wish you had told me how it was,"

he said once, reproachfully. "It would have saved me a great deal of misery."

"I was afraid," she returned in a low tone. "I did not know what harm it might do—*him* to let it be known that he was there."

When she had told him of her leaving Westby Lodge and her meeting with Pelter, she leant back in her chair with an air of exhaustion, and Thornburgh made some notes.

"Do you really think I shall get off?" she asked presently.

"Of course you will get off. That man did it—everything points to that. A little further inquiry will make it plain that you had nothing to do with it."

"I feel as if I hadn't a chance," she said, with a shiver. "And if I do get off, I shall never be the same again."

There will always be a stigma on me. Oh, I haven't deserved it!" she moaned. "I have only tried to do the best I could for Sophy. It was wrong to tell you those falsehoods, but I could not help myself, and surely it wasn't so bad that I must be disgraced in this way."

Thornburgh could only repeat what he had said already. She was not disgraced; she would certainly be set at liberty soon. But he felt that his words had no effect upon her, and it was a relief to him that he was called upon to go, the time he was allowed having come to an end.

As he walked away from the prison his chief emotion at first was something very like gladness. Gay was cleared from all the doubts that had surrounded her. No one could pelt her now with vile hints and base insinuations. No one could

charge her with anything but undue regard for another.

Only for a few moments he dwelt on this. Then his joy was put to flight as he thought of her position. In any danger to her he could not believe—not for one moment would he admit that she would not be set free upon further investigation. But that would take time. There might be serious delay in hunting down the real culprit, and meanwhile she was suffering. His heart ached for her, crushed and broken under the stroke of calamity. He winced from the pain his own pity gave him. She had always been so strong and brave; it was cruel to see her weak and beaten, and to be powerless to help her. He felt capable of any deed of self-devotion for her sake, and he could do nothing—nothing!

He went straight to the station. He had just time to catch a train to Bayford. His man was waiting for him there with the dog-cart, and he drove back fast, mindful that Sophy was waiting in feverish suspense for his return. His errand was quickly done. Mr. Mildmay met him in the hall, and by a look and sign Thornburgh told him the tidings he had brought. He drew his cousin into the study and asked a few questions, then he went to Sophy, and Thornburgh made haste to his own house.

After dinner, Thornburgh received a message begging that he would go over to Westby Lodge. The agitation of the day had told on Mr. Mildmay. He had a worried and irritable air, very unlike his usual placid geniality. Trouble such as had befallen him was an entire stranger

to his life, and he did not "as a stranger give it welcome." He deeply resented the appearance of such an odious disturbance.

"Sophy is asleep now," he said, with a sigh. "Of course she has been very ill since I told her. I had to send for the doctor at last, and he gave her a sleeping draught. I only hope she may not have a serious illness."

"It is terrible for her," said Thornburgh, with full sympathy.

"Terrible — terrible! It is such an *outrageous* thing!" cried Mr. Mildmay, sharply. "To think that everything was right, and find out all at once—I never heard of such a thing in real life before." He sighed heavily. It was hard on him to be called on to take a leading part in such a drama. "And under the circum-

stances it will be impossible to hush it up. Everybody will hear the story. We shall be in all the papers in the country."

And then it appeared that Mr. Mildmay did not share Thornburgh's view of Gay's conduct. He was not at all softened towards her. He held that she had been altogether wrong ; in fact, it almost seemed that he considered her responsible for her father's existence, so bitter was his blame of her.

"What would you have had her do?" asked Thornburgh, drily, at last.

"She ought to have confessed the truth when she knew that her father was alive," said Mr. Mildmay, decidedly. "No good ever comes of concealment and deception."

"I don't know. Sophy has not learnt the truth till she is free. It strikes me

that Miss Rushton would think that a great good. What would you have done if you had been told in October that Rushton was alive? You couldn't have hushed the matter up. You would have had to separate from Sophy."

"Something might have been done," persisted Mr. Mildmay. "We might have gone abroad, so that people wouldn't know of the separation; but now there will be no end of a scandal."

"It will soon blow over. Luckily, he is dead, and you can make things straight at once."

"Yes, if Sophy is able, we will go to town directly, and I will get a special licence. There must be no delay. And then I will keep her away from the neighbourhood for a time. It will never do for her to be near Gay. She will want

to see her, and the agitation would be so bad for her health."

"I should have thought it worse for her health to desert a person who has been so devoted to her."

"It would be too great a shock to her feelings to see the girl just now. You seem to think I am too hard on Gay?"—in a tone of surprised remonstrance.

"I think you are very hard on her, and atrociously unjust to her. She has thought too much of your wife and too little of herself—that is the reason why she is in these straits—and you turn your back on her."

"I can't take such a lenient view of her conduct, you see."

"You won't take a fair view."

"Miles, we aren't going to quarrel about this, surely?"

“As you please. We certainly are not friends, if you treat Miss Rushton in this way.”

Mr. Mildmay regarded him with an air of amazement and inquiry.

“Yes, her friends are my friends; her enemies are my enemies. As soon as I can, I shall ask her to be my wife.”

“Good Lord!” gasped the other. “What are you thinking of? You are mad. Don’t let your pity carry you away——”

“Oh, there is no pity in question, many thanks! I am in love with her—I have been in love with her for months,” said Thornburgh.

If he could do nothing else for her, at least he could wear her colours proudly. There was an awkward silence. After that declaration Mr. Mildmay

could hardly utter the remonstrances that rushed to his lips. Presently Thornburgh rose.

"I will say good night," he said. "No, don't come to the door with me; I will let myself out."

As he crossed the hall, he heard a loud whisper from above. "Cousin Miles, wait a second;" and Jim ran down the stairs in his dressing-gown and bedroom slippers, his hair tumbled, and his face clouded by an expression of solemn concern.

"Jim, you ought to be in bed," said Thornburgh, who felt in no mood for Jim's society.

"I've been watching for you ever since you came to see father," returned Jim, in a cautious undertone. "I wanted to speak to you. Oh, Cousin Miles, they

won't really do anything to Gay, will they?"

"No, no!" returned his cousin, stroking back the child's fair curls.

"It's a beastly shame," said Jim, forcibly. "I should like to kill Jackson for taking her away, and when I'm bigger I'll pay him out somehow. If I was as big as William, I'd do it now. Look here!" Jim produced a large box of chocolate from under his dressing-gown. "Mother gave this to me last week, and I want Gay to have it. Will you take it to her?"

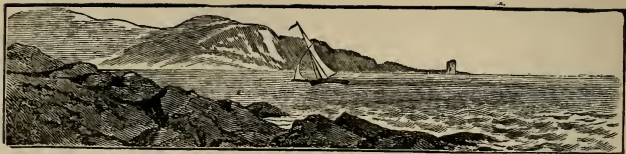
"All right, I will see that she has it. Now run away to bed, Jim."

Halfway up the stairs, Jim paused and turned.

"Give Gay my love and a lot of kisses," he said.

Jim must indeed feel for Gay when he was brought to send that message. In his normal state, he sneered at such attentions as only fit for girls, and quite beneath masculine dignity.





CHAPTER VII.

WAITING.

“Again ; and bring me word how ’tis with her.”

Cymbeline.

THE gossips in the neighbourhood of Westby Lodge were very fortunate. Generally speaking, the publication of the facts of a case deprives the popular version of most of its piquancy, and ruthlessly cuts down what may be said on the subject. But the truth about Gay Rushton was more interesting and worthy of discussion than the fiction had been.

It had been agreeably startling to find that she had given cause for severe com-

ment and charitable conjecture ; but the calamity that had befallen the Mildmays was much more interesting. Gay was a newcomer and stranger, and no misdeeds of hers could greatly surprise people. "With such a father, you know, she could not be brought up well ; and it was no wonder that she had shown so little principle." But that the Mildmays should be mixed up with such tragedy—a well-known, highly respected family, concerning which no doubtful story had ever even been whispered !—this was something to stimulate general interest to the highest pitch, and cause tongues to wag fast and merrily.

The interest was not of an ill-natured kind. Neither Sophy nor Mr. Mildmay had made enemies to rejoice at their disaster. Everybody was very sorry for them ; but,

of course, everybody was glad to have such a story to talk about. The *affaire* Mildmay was the one topic of the hour, and he or she was happy that could furnish any fresh detail about it.

Mr. Saville was particularly lucky in being the first to learn when the second marriage ceremony was to take place—a point on which curiosity was much exercised; and he and his wife made a wide round of calls to let their acquaintances know as soon as possible that it was to be within a week of Mr. Rushton's death.

"It will be a very different wedding from the other," sighed Sophy's friends. "Poor thing, how nice she looked that day, and how happy she seemed!"

The ceremony was got over very quietly in a London church, and then the pair went abroad. Mr. Mildmay had not been

at all shaken by Thornburgh in his determination to keep Sophy apart from Gay. He felt it was unreasonable of his cousin to think that Sophy had anything to do at this crisis but to play the part of chief sufferer. He was indignant at Miles's insensibility to Sophy's claims ; and when he saw Thornburgh before his departure, he quoted with emphasis the opinion of the doctor that Mrs. Mildmay must have perfect quiet after the terrible shock she had undergone, and enlarged on the necessity of guarding her from all mental disturbance.

"I shall be thankful to have her out of reach of the papers," he added ; "she *will* read them now, and they excite her fearfully."

The papers added grievously to Thornburgh's misery at this time. Every day

the local journals had some paragraphs about the Kelters murder, in which bits of information about the life of the murdered man and that of his daughter were served up with a *sauce piquante* of misstatements and exaggerations. Mr. Rushton's whole career was thus set forth, and poor Gay was presented as one who had had a sadly wide and varied experience. She had sung at a music hall; she had danced at a theatre; she had been jilted by "a scion of an aristocratic family well known in fashionable circles," and by threats of an action for breach of promise had extorted handsome compensation from her fickle admirer.

Perhaps Thornburgh was ultra-fastidious; for it did not irritate him half so much to read these tales as to find a penny-a-liner paying Gay compliments,

speaking of her as remarkably attractive in appearance, highly accomplished, gifted with great histrionic and musical talent. It was horrible profanation that his darling should be the subject of vulgar comment and insolent praise; he writhed to feel that she was exposed to this glaring publicity and prying curiosity.

Gay was brought before the magistrates at Castleton on Wednesday, when she had been in custody nearly a week. The court was crowded, for the case was the most interesting that had been known in that part of the country within the memory of man, and there was immense curiosity to see the heroine of such a story. Public feeling was distinctly in Gay's favour. It generally is so when an accused person is young and a gentlewoman; and in this instance it was more

than her youth, sex, and social position that moved her partisans; the story of her devotion to her stepmother appealed to their sentiment.

She faced the court with perfect calmness, and showed none of the painful excitement which Thornburgh had witnessed. A chair was given to her, and she sat looking straight before her, apparently unconscious of the scrutiny of which she was the object. The evidence given at the inquest was repeated, the item of the finding of the bank-notes was added, and then a remand was requested, in order that further investigation might be made and Pelter be sought for, and she was removed to her prison.

Thornburgh was not one of the crowd; it could do Gay no good if he were

present, and it would be intolerably painful to him. Lucy Mildmay was there, and gave him a full report afterwards. She had taken up Gay's cause warmly, and went to see her as often as she could. Thornburgh could not pay any more visits to the prison, as he had no recognized relation to Gay, and he went over to Castleton to hear of her from his cousin. He found some satisfaction in these talks, and in sending through Lucy every luxury that could be obtained. In this way, Gay was supplied with books and flowers, the daintiest food and the best wine.

He found no sympathy nearer home. Mrs. Fletcher was overcome with horror at the affair. She pitied Sophy heartily; she was deeply afflicted that she and hers should be connected with anything

so unpleasant as bigamy and murder, and there her softer emotions ended. Gay she blamed even more heartily than Mr. Mildmay did. It was quite useless to defend the girl, to point out that her motives had been unselfish. Mrs. Fletcher measured her conduct by her rigid little rule, and found it sadly wanting. No good motive could justify the deceit which Gay had practised, she said severely.

"Why, surely, Miles, you cannot excuse her?" she cried, with an air of virtuous amazement.

"No, I admire her," declared Thornburgh, recklessly. "It is nobler, it seems to me, to take the risk of doing wrong for the sake of another than to be selfishly careful not to err."

Mrs. Fletcher sighed with a look of pain. Thornburgh's infatuation for this

dreadful girl was sad indeed. She had no personal feeling about it, and was not in the least jealous ; as Mabel did not care for her cousin, and was receiving with evident pleasure Mr. Ashton's assiduous attentions, she had no temptation to be so, and could pity Thornburgh with pure disinterestedness.

"That is a dangerous doctrine," she said, with all the dignity of a woman who has taken up her position on an unassailable moral height.

"No, I don't think so. Few people are subject to any temptation to go too far in self-sacrifice."

It was, of course, impossible that Mrs. Fletcher should show any kindness to a person of whom she disapproved so thoroughly.

"Her kindness is kept in strict order,"

remarked Miss Mildmay. "I am sure it could never cross the threshold of a prison. She adores appearances — anybody that gets into a bad scrape is thereby condemned with her. She will be too busy in deploring that a connection of hers is in the papers to think of much else."

Jim had been left at Westby Lodge to the care of the servants, who allowed him to run wild. Nobody liked to be strict with him while there was such trouble in the family, and he enjoyed a blissful freedom and substantial tokens of the cook's sympathy. Now and then the lightheartedness which this state of things naturally produced was dashed by mournful remembrances of Gay; and when these fits of low spirits overtook him, he marched over to Thornburgh Hall to seek consolation in his cousin's society.

One day he entered Thornburgh's study, carrying a bag, with the air of one who has important business in hand.

"Cousin Miles," he said gravely, "I haven't done any lessons since Gay went away, and I think I ought to do some. It will please her when she comes back, if I have, won't it?"

Thornburgh warmly applauded such a virtuous sentiment.

"So," went on Jim, calmly, "I've brought my reading-book, and my slate, and my copy-book, and I will do my lessons here."

"Here?" ejaculated his cousin, aghast.

"Yes, I can't do them at home, you know, for there is nobody to teach me. I won't be in the way," reassuringly. "You must just hear me read, and set my sums—I'll tell you the kind of sums

I have—and then I'll do the sums, and write a copy."

It was not an agreeable prospect to Thornburgh, who was not enough of a child-lover to care to give such very elementary instruction. But he had not the heart to turn Jim out—Gay was so fond of the little fellow.

"Well, let me hear you read," he said, and he listened patiently to a few pages of an easy reading-book.

Then Jim produced a slate.

"I do adding-up and taking-from sums," he explained. "There are some that Gay set me on the slate still—I forgot to wash them off before I came. May I go and ask Mrs. Mason for a sponge?"

Thornburgh took the slate and looked at the figures, with a choking in his throat

to think of the change since the day Gay had made them.

“You see what sort they are,” went on Jim. “Can I have a sponge to clean the slate, Cousin Miles?”

Thornburgh put the slate on one side.

“No, don’t clean it, Jim.”

“But I can’t do my sums, if I don’t.”

Jim was provided with a piece of paper, and after a little argument he accepted this substitute for his slate. He criticised with much freedom the sums which Thornburgh set him, but he manfully worked his way through the rows of figures. He wrote a copy with lavish expenditure of ink, and then his morbid sense of duty was satisfied.

“Gay will say I have been a very good boy,” he remarked, with a self-righteous air. “When she comes back,

you'll tell her that I did my lessons nicely, won't you, Cousin Miles ?”

Thornburgh promised, wincing in his heart. He hardly dared look forward to Gay's release. She *would* be released of course. On that head he refused to entertain a doubt—but what was to be after that he did not venture to picture. Certainly she would not come back, as Jim supposed. She would come to *him* as soon as might be. But he could not dwell on his hope of that overwhelming joy ; such a great space of suffering must be toiled through before it could be reached, that it seemed very remote and shadowy. While she was on the rack, he could think of nothing but her pain.

In the afternoon, he went to Castleton to hear Lucy's report of a visit which she was to make Gay that day. He was

received by the aunt, Mrs. Bruce, who informed him that Lucy had not yet returned from the gaol.

“I hope she will bring us a good account of Miss Rushton’s health,” said the old lady. “My great fear is that she may break down entirely—poor young thing, it is so very trying for her—and it would be very bad if she was ill *there*. Have they heard nothing of that man-servant yet?”

Mrs. Bruce had none of Mrs. Fletcher’s distaste for the Kelters case. She was full of interest in the story, and instead of resenting the family connection with it, she was highly pleased that her niece brought her into close relation with anything so exciting. It was not every day that she could get news at first hand, and she took pleasure in the callers who

flocked to hear all that could be learnt about the heroine of the hour. She had no stones to throw at Gay; she was too grateful for the entertainment she provided. A love of gossip makes one tolerant at times.

When Lucy appeared, she did not bring a cheering account.

"No, she is not at all well," she answered her aunt's inquiry; "she looks wretchedly ill."

"Poor girl! I am sadly afraid she will break down," said Mrs. Bruce, pausing in her knitting.

"Oh no, she won't," said Lucy, drily. "There is no hope of that—she isn't made of the stuff that breaks down."

"My dear Lucy! No hope?"

"If she was thoroughly knocked up, she would feel the misery of it less. But she

will have to go through it all without any such relief. There's a ring," said Lucy, sharply, starting up. "Come into the dining-room, Miles; I don't care to see callers just now."

Thornburgh followed her precipitate retreat through a little ante-room which connected drawing and dining-room.

"Thank you," he said fervently.

"I can't stand talking over the poor child with all the gossiping old women, male and female, of the place!" cried Lucy. "When one has just seen her, it is too much to have her served up at afternoon tea!"

"Did she seem worse to-day?"

"She was quite quiet and composed—people would say she is bearing it wonderfully well. I have only seen her give way once; she cried a little when I took

her the chocolate from Jim. But it is a frightful strain on body and mind. She can neither eat nor sleep properly, and she seems unable to do anything to divert her thoughts. She cannot read ; she says she cannot fix her attention for more than a few minutes, and everything in books seems to make her feel more keenly that she is shut up. And she told me not to send her any more flowers, Miles."

Thornburgh's face fell.

"Do you think that is because I sent them?"

"I don't think so ; she did not seem to suspect that I am not the giver. She said that they seem to mock her ; they have no business there, and she cannot bear the sight of them."



CHAPTER VIII.

A FOOL FOR HIS PAINS.

“He saw his duty a dead sure thing,
And he went for it.”

Jim Bludso.

WHEN he had left Gay, Pelter walked off at a steady, rapid pace across the moorland. He knew all the country about there well; the many hours during his stay at Kelters in which he had been free to follow his own devices, he had spent mostly in long rambles, and he had no difficulty in finding his way. By short cuts, he soon reached Alverthwaite, the town to which it had been planned that

he should escort Gay that night. For the last mile or so of his journey he loitered, occasionally consulting his watch, and when he reached the station he had to make a rush for the train, and hurried through the booking-office without taking a ticket. But when, at the next stoppage, tickets were inspected, he produced one which had been bought at a large town some miles on the other side of Alverthwaite. He had procured tickets for himself and Miss Rushton earlier in the day, thinking that it would make it more difficult to trace her if she did not book from the place she was leaving.

He went to London ; and, as soon as the shops were open, he visited a barber, and had his beard and whiskers shaved off—an operation which works an immense change in a man's appearance. He

regarded himself with satisfaction in the glass afterwards; he looked ten years younger. Then he bought some clothes and a box, and in the afternoon he started from Paddington for Liverpool, where he took up his quarters at a quiet, respectable hotel.

He ordered a good dinner in a private sitting-room, and sat down to the meal in a state of jubilant delight, which was a new thing to him. Little pleasure had life afforded him so far. From early youth he had been knocked about the world, a prey to poverty and misfortune, till he had been brought to something of the dogged endurance of an ill-treated animal. But he was worse off than the animal, inasmuch as, though ill-luck surprised him no more than blows surprise the donkey of a savage costermonger, he cherished a sullen

grudge against his fate, and this resentment made his lot harder to bear. Now at last the yoke was off; fortune had flung aside her whip, and taken him into favour.

At last—at last the cause of right had triumphed, the cheat had been forced to give up his spoil, and the proper owner was restored to possession. It wasn't such a badly managed world after all, for there, in the darkened house, with the wild moorland about it, his enemy was lying dead, and here he was alive and strong, with the means of enjoyment in his hands, and a consciousness of power to enjoy.

He laughed to himself once, when the waiter was out of the room; things had turned out so much better than he could have imagined. Yesterday he would have

thought it enough and more than enough of satisfaction to be free of his employer, and to get his own again; and over and above that he had this gay lightness of heart, and felt as if he had for ever parted from the dull lumpish fellow who had been a slow wooden drudge so long. He had stuck doggedly by Mr. Rushton, determined never to leave him till he had in one way or another recovered the money he had been cheated out of. His imagination was too sluggish to form a plan of action, and he had waited with stubborn patience till chance should give him an opportunity of accomplishing his end easily and safely. He had spent the last two years with his mind fixed on that purpose, and now that it was achieved there was a reaction after the long concentration and self-suppression.

Next day he took his passage to New York, in a steamer which was to start on Saturday. He took a steerage passage; he was not going to make any display of his money yet, for the less notice he attracted till he was safely away the better. That he had taken so much of Mr. Rushton's property did not exercise his conscience at all. He held that he had an undeniable right to it. Mr. Rushton had tricked him in the fashion he had related to Gay, and on that foundation had reared his fortune—it was only just that some of the money should come back to the man he had robbed. But that view would not be taken by the law, and if, when Mr. Rushton's death were discovered, any suspicion was excited that his property had been conveyed, it would be awkward if Pelter were followed. He thought of no

other contingency. It did not occur to him that any question of foul play about the death would arise; and he took it for granted that it would be seen at once that the man had committed suicide. And, though he took into account the possibility that he might be pursued, he did not seriously fear it. His old feeling that he was marked for ill-luck had vanished, and an exultant confidence in his star had sprung up within him.

He would have liked to find some outlet for the jubilant mood which possessed him, to gratify his faculty for pleasure. With his training, it was inevitable that he should turn to coarse dissipation for enjoyment. He had no conception of any other indulgence. "Culture is half way to heaven," and culture had not raised poor Pelter. He was of the earth, earthy,

and his notion of pleasure was to gamble and to get drunk. But a prudent instinct of self-preservation kept him from seeking these delights. He must be his own master for the present. And he restrained himself and lived with Spartan temperance, in imagination, meanwhile, holding high revel, and gloating over the ecstasies which the future held.

So the days passed till Saturday ; and then, as he ate his breakfast, he looked at a newspaper which happened to be a day old, and presently found an account of the inquest on Mr. Rushton.

Pelter read it, his face gathering deeper and deeper gloom, till he came to the verdict. At that, he stamped suddenly, and under his breath cursed the jury, the coroner, and the witnesses, each and all. Then he wiped his forehead and began

the report again, weighing each word carefully, and muttering a running commentary. He had just finished it, when a waiter entered to inform him that his cab was at the door. The man had to repeat his words, for Pelter stared at him at first as if he did not understand. Then he drew a long breath and seemed to wake up.

“All right,” he said briefly.

He was ready to start. His bill had been paid overnight, and his belongings were packed. He hurried downstairs and got into the cab.

It was a bright morning ; the sunshine gave a touch of beauty even to the ugly streets ; the people going to their work had a cheerful look ; there was an exhilarating freshness in the air. Pelter saw nothing of the glad morning ; the light

had no promise for him. He sat in a corner of the cab, his hands clenched, his face deadly white, while a desperate struggle went on—not in him, it seemed, but outside him, and he looked on, powerless to decide, waiting in mortal terror for the issue.

Poor little Miss Rushton! Yes, it was a shame, a —— shame, that any harm had come to her. It was her father's fault; just like him to die in such a way as to bring other people into trouble. Nothing in his life, thought Pelter, unconsciously imitating Shakespeare, had been more characteristic of him than the leaving it. He would never stop to think what the consequences might be—not he; his selfishness was so gross that it blinded him to everything that did not immediately concern himself. It was her father's doing

that this disaster had fallen upon her. He, Pelter, was blameless.

He was sorry ; he would do anything that he could to help her, but there was nothing that he could do. Going? Of course he was going ; how could he run the risk of staying longer *now*? It would be raving madness not to make his escape good at once ; he might as well put the rope about his neck as delay. A man must look out for himself.

He chuckled hoarsely once. This influence that was tugging at him was too ridiculous. It suggested that he should not go ; and all the time he was every minute nearer departure and safety. There was not time to fight out the debate ; in an hour he would be off.

The cab stopped ; he alighted, paid the

driver, and went on board the tug which was waiting to convey passengers to the steamer. He pushed his way through the people who were standing about on the deck, and sat down. Somebody spoke to him. He did not catch the words, and turned such a savage look on the man that had addressed him that the remark was not repeated. Every now and then he drew out his watch. The time was going slowly, but it *was* going; he would soon be on his way. He watched the people coming on board, trying to fix his mind on what was before his eyes. Only a few minutes now; the men were preparing to raise the gangway.

At the last minute, just before it was drawn back, a man on the deck made a rush forward and crossed it.

"You were very nearly taken off," re-

marked a cheery old man, who was lounging on the quay.

“Ay, I know that,” said Pelter, gruffly.

The tug glided down the river ; and the man that had been so nearly taken off watched it from the shore, as if the sight fascinated him, a blank look on his face. Presently he turned and walked away slowly, chafing with sullen disappointment and a sense of ill-usage. He felt as if something he had depended on had suddenly played him false. He might have trusted that his own interest would lead him safely, and it had given way.

He could not go, simply could not. He had been forced to come back. And why ? Only because he could not bear to think of a girl in distress.

It was all nonsense ; she did not really need his help. She could not be in serious

danger. When the matter was properly inquired into and all the circumstances were known, nobody could suppose that she was capable of lifting her hand against her father's life, and she would come out all right. And if he returned, he was running on destruction. His story about Mr. Rushton's death would not be believed, and if by a miracle it should be accepted, he would be punished for stealing his master's property.

Pelter's decision was not made that morning. He went back to his hotel, making some excuse to account for his reappearance, and there he lingered for a few days, painfully revolving his case. His mind never moved quickly, and it was hampered now by the tremendous issue at stake. He was not helped by any satisfaction in making a sacrifice—

rather, the fact that it was a sacrifice he contemplated held him back. He had been accustomed all his life to believe that a man should look after himself first, and he had practised his faith pretty consistently. Pure disinterested generosity seemed to him more foolish than anything else.

So he went about heavily, and when at last he resolved to go back and tell all that he knew about Mr. Rushton's death, he had no lofty emotions. He was angry—angry with fate, and angry with himself. If he wasn't a fool, he would be safe now. But he was most angry with his late employer. There was something grotesque in his deep disgust that Mr. Rushton had performed his exit from this world in such a way.

“Just like him,” he muttered; “*just* like

him! He was born to plague other folks. He robbed me, and now he must get me into this bog. My money first, and then my life! For nobody will believe me. I'm in for it, and I'm a fool for my pains. But I must do it. She'll get out of prison now, and it's a fitter place for me than for her."

So, grudging, kicking against the pricks that goaded him on, Pelter prepared to go. He was not by any means qualified for a hero's part. He did not even know that he was at all heroic, he was ashamed instead of being proud of his action. But perhaps the sacrifice was none the less because it was not made with any grace or willingness.

It was on Wednesday that he reached his determination. In the afternoon he left the hotel to walk to the station. He

had only gone a few yards from the door, when a policeman touched his shoulder.

“Your name’s Pelter, isn’t it?”

He looked stupidly at the man, making no reply.

“You’re wanted,” went on the constable. “I have a warrant here. You must come to Castleton.”

“Just like my luck,” said Pelter, bitterly. If he had gone back voluntarily, it would have given him a chance; but that hope was destroyed by the arrest. And Miss Rushton would never know that he had tried to help her! Then he withdrew into sullen silence and said no more.





CHAPTER IX.

PELTER'S STORY.

"Then give me leave to go.

Whither?

Whither you will, so I were from your sights."

King Richard II.

THE day after the papers had announced the arrest of Pelter, they published a statement, which the man had volunteered, of what he knew about the death at Kelters. It was a perfectly truthful narrative, but what was considered the main assertion—that Pelter had returned to Kelters to find his employer dead—was of course received with utter incredulity. He had expected no

better. The important part of his story in his eyes was that which related to Miss Rushton. It was for her sake that he had spoken.

He related that he found her glove lying on the floor, and flung it into the fire. He did not see that the light thing fell back—he was in a great hurry, for he knew that she was to come that evening, and he wanted to prevent her from entering the house. He gave her the money that had been found in her desk, because he thought she ought to have it—and he added his reason for feeling he had a claim to the property he had taken. He told her that her father had gone away suddenly, and as she knew that he was intending to leave the place at that time, she only thought he had hastened his departure. Lastly, he said that just after

he had parted from Miss Rushton, he had seen a man in a workman's dress going through the wood towards Kelvers.

On this last item Gay's partisans pounced as the kernel of Pelter's story.

"This man's evidence will be very important, surely," said Lucy, jubilantly to Thornburgh. "He must have seen Gay returning after she spoke to Pelter. You will try to find him without delay?"

"We will hunt him up if we can, of course."

"Do you think it will be difficult to find him?"

"It may be—there is so little to go upon. He may be quite out of reach by this time. And if he is found, he may do no good; he may not be able to prove more than that he saw her near the house."

"But he must have seen more than

that! He must have been walking behind her, and he can show that she didn't go into the house at all—that is my theory. Pelter says he was going towards Kelvers—he must have been behind Gay in the wood.”

“Perhaps he was on the same path——”

“Or near enough to see her—it isn't a large wood.”

“Yes, there is a chance that he may be of use,” acknowledged Thornburgh.

“Oh, I am sure it will be all right,” declared Lucy. “The man will be found, and he will know all that we want him to know; you shall not dash my hopes by your cautious warnings.”

Lucy's sanguine anticipations were somewhat checked at her next visit to the prison. When she spoke of this new witness, Gay only shook her head.

"I don't see how it can help me if he is found," she said. "I went on to the house after I had spoken to Pelter—I wanted to ask him some questions about my father. I knocked more than once, but I saw no light and heard nothing. I supposed that Pelter had gone over the moor when he left me, and I came away. This man could only say that he saw me walking towards the house."

Lucy's face fell.

"I am very unlucky," went on Gay. "It has been a bad business all through, and the end will be of a piece with the rest. You had better give up hoping for me, Lucy."

"Nonsense!" said Lucy, brusquely. "We all hope—things must come right soon. You have done nothing."

Gay smiled—a faint bitter smile.

"*That* is nothing to the purpose. Perhaps I should be better off if I had done something bad; then probably some one else would be punished for it, and I should go free."

"Poor child, poor child! Don't lose heart, dear—you will soon get out of this horrid place."

Gay made no answer. She had no such hope; she could not believe in anything but storm and blackness.

"What is the punishment for being accessory to a murder?" she asked presently.

"Oh, Gay, don't think of such dreadful things."

"I wish you would tell me—I should like to have some idea what I may expect."

"I don't know—really and truly, dear,

I don't know exactly. You must not give way to such thoughts—you must hope for the best."

The magistrates sat the day after Pelter's arrest. Only formal business was done, and another remand was granted, as there had not been time to summon the witnesses.

During the interval which followed, attempts were made to find the man whom Pelter had seen. The search was carried on by Gay's friends without any eager wish for success, for after what she had said it seemed a very forlorn hope that his testimony would be in her favour. So when all the inquiries set on foot came to nothing, it was felt to be just as well that he was not forthcoming.

Meanwhile Jim's fit of industry had

quickly ended, and he forsook books and work for healthful play. One day it struck him that it would be a pleasant change to take a walk across the moors, and he set out with Fido, who very unwillingly obeyed his whistle. Fido had no conscientious scruples as to his little master's breaking bounds; but he was fat and lazy, and disliked walking, except when he went out on private expeditions for his own pleasure. He was a sociable dog, and had many canine acquaintances in the village, whom he visited; but he had a rooted objection to exercise when it was a matter of duty.

Jim insisted on his attendance, and was fully occupied for some time in thwarting his attempts to return home. Fido was always falling behind, with the purpose of sneaking back when he was not under

observation. At last he was convinced that he had no chance of escaping Jim's vigilance, and philosophically making the best of his fate, he found amusement in chasing the sheep which were feeding on the moorland, and rushing after rabbits. Jim encouraged him in these diversions, and the two wandered on happily in the afternoon sunshine, one as heedless as the other about the flight of time.

When at last the lengthening of the shadows struck Jim, and he began to think it would be well to return to tea, he found that he was in a part of the country which he did not know. The hills that he could see were quite unlike those he was familiar with; no landmark was visible to guide him back, and he did not remember the way by which he had come. He was lost—there could be no

doubt of that—and he felt on the whole well pleased that it was so; there was something manly in the position, impossible of attainment by a *little* boy, who always went out with somebody to take care of him. Father and Cousin Miles had lost their way before now, when they were going over the hills; so had William. Jim had listened many a time to a thrilling narrative of how the groom had once gone astray in a mist, and nearly wandered on to the peat mosses, where he might have perished in a hole.

Jim turned in the direction which he thought led homewards, and for a time walked on stoutly. Presently he observed that Fido was not in sight—he had forgotten him while he considered his case. He stood still, and whistled and called as loudly as he could, but Fido did not

appear; he retraced his steps to look for the dog, but nothing was to be seen or heard of him. A pang of loneliness smote Jim, and he felt deeply disgusted at Fido for forsaking him just then. Of course he knew his way back, and he was hurrying homeward now, selfish beast, neither thinking nor caring that his little master was left alone!

When Jim at last gave up the search and resumed his march, a good deal of time had been lost, and the afternoon was well advanced. Jim began to feel tired, his sense of loneliness deepened, and unpleasant doubts rose within him as to whether he was in the right way. His courage was ebbing low, when he became aware of the figure of a man tramping heavily through the heather.

Then the wide slopes were no longer

gloomy ; the great vault of sky lost the solemnity which had overawed the solitary human mite ; Jim's spirit revived, and he ran in fearless confidence towards the blessed apparition that had come to his help.

"Please can you tell me the way to Westby Lodge?" he said politely.

"Westby Lodge?" was the slow response. "That's a long way off."

"Will you please take me there? I'm Mr. Mildmay's little boy, and I'm lost, and he will give you a reward, if you take me home."

The other, a youngish, fair-haired man, with a gentle, somewhat dull expression, regarded the child with some curiosity.

"You've run away from home, I reckon?"

"I came out for a walk," returned

Jim, with dignity, "and I've lost my way."

"Ay, ay ; and you want to be taken back ?"

"Yes, please."

"Well, I suppose I must take you," said the man, with no great willingness.

"Oh, thank you," cried Jim, fervently.

"But it's a good bit of a way, more than you can walk," in a soliloquizing tone.

"Well," as if an expedient had occurred to him, "come along with me, and I'll see if I can get you back."

He struck into a path across the moor, and walked on in silence ; Jim trotted by his side, too tired and hungry to be capable of his usual flow of speech. They came out on a road, and Jim's conductor presently stopped at a little house, where a very modest signboard intimated that

refreshment might be obtained within. Here he entered into a talk aside with the master of the place, while Jim, who had sat down on the first chair he found, waited passively. The innkeeper was very willing to do anything for one of the Mildmay family—he lent his cart to convey the little wanderer home, and offered him some bread and milk which was gladly accepted.

“ I can’t pay you—I haven’t any money with me—but father will pay you,” said Jim, gravely.

The rough pony that drew the cart went at a very sober pace, and Jim soon grew tired of the silence which his driver observed and began to chatter.

“ Is it very far to Westby Lodge ? ” he asked, presently.

“ Matter of six miles,” returned the

other, and added after a pause, "by the road. It's shorter if you go over the moor."

"You can't take the cart by the moor?"

The man shook his head.

"Don't you know the way?"

"The roads are bad over the moor for driving," he explained. "I know the way well enough—I could find it at night."

"Have you ever gone to Westby Lodge before?"

"No, but I've gone to St. Austin's."

"Do you ever go at night?"

"Sometimes."

"Have you ever gone past Kelters at night?" asked Jim, quickly.

"Sometimes," was the brief rejoinder.

There was a silence. Jim stared at his interlocutor, his little brain struggling with

a bold thought. He had heard a good deal of talk among the servants about the Kelters case, and knew that it was desired to find a certain mysterious unknown, who had been near Kelters on the night of the murder. Jim vaguely understood that this person could help to free Gay; only that morning the cook had been lamenting that he was not to be found. The servants, knowing nothing of Gay's account of that night, were convinced that his evidence would clear her triumphantly. Was this the man?

"I wonder——" said Jim, slowly. "Did you ever see a lady when you were going past Kelters at night?" he blurted out eagerly. "Did you? Oh, do tell me, if you did—I want to know awfully."

"What do you want to know for?"

Jim explained hurriedly and incoherently.

“ Haven’t you seen it in the papers ? ”
he added.

“ I don’t read much.”

“ They think she’ll get out, if that man can say he saw her. Oh, was it you ? I’ll ask father to give you some of my money—he keeps my Christmas and birthday sovereigns for me till I am bigger, but he’ll let you have some,” cried Jim, who had no hesitation about bribing a witness.

That evening Thornburgh was walking up and down before his house in restless suspense, when a cart lumbered heavily up the drive, and he was hailed by an excited cry.

“ Jim ! ” he exclaimed. “ What mischief have you been in now ? ”

Jim was too big with importance to notice this injurious suspicion. He stood up and pointed to his driver.

“I’ve got him, Cousin Miles,” he announced. “It’s all right! He’s the man, and he did see Gay, and I’ve brought him for you to tell him all about it.”

Gay rose the next day with the hope that she was going to make her last appearance before the magistrates. She did not hope to be set free—all she looked forward to was that the case would be sent for trial, and that for some weeks she would be shut up in quiet. For a while, she would not be exposed to eager curious eyes, she would not have to be composed while she listened to the evidence that told against her.

Those appearances in court were such torture that it would be an unspeakable relief to be free from the dread of them.

She did not think of what might come later. She was so exhausted that she was incapable of looking beyond the space of rest and shelter which she craved.

Lucy was in court, and after her first glance at Gay she turned away her eyes ; the contrast between the girl and the man standing beside her was too painful. Pelter had a sullen lowering look that morning. He was very angry that, so far, his testimony had done Miss Rushton no good. He had expected that she would be discharged straightway ; and here she was in the dock—a position which seemed to him even more unseemly than it did to Miss Mildmay. He would not look at her, and stood leaning over the rail of the dock, with a dark frown on his downcast face. His demeanour gave great satisfaction to most of the spectators, as being exactly

what might be expected in a desperate ruffian.

He stood thus, stolid and unmoved, while evidence against him was gone through. Then Mr. Gibson, the lawyer who had been retained for Gay's defence, rose and began to speak. Gay did not listen to him at first ; she would rather that he had been silent. It was futile to attempt to put a favourable aspect on the facts, and it made the sitting longer. She was very tired, and would be so glad when it was over. She sat in passive endurance, her thoughts straying from scene and speaker, but presently something roused her attention, and after that she did not lose a word.

Mr. Gibson said it would be shown that there was no foundation for the monstrous charge of murder, for Miss

Rushton was not in the house at all on the evening of her father's death. A witness had fortunately been found who could prove this, and whose account tallied exactly with the accounts already given by each of the accused of the events of that evening. When the magistrates had heard the evidence that would be laid before them, they would see that it disposed entirely of the theory that Miss Rushton had any knowledge of the murder, and that she had aided the guilty man's escape. They would hear that she met Pelter, and had a very brief conversation with him. It was incredible that Pelter, if he had been guilty of murder, would confess the fact to the daughter of his victim, and thereby provide a witness against himself. Why should he? What object was there in so doing? Miss

Rushton had no reason even to suspect that anything was wrong. The story that, according to her own statement and Pelter's, the man told her, was perfectly simple and probable. She knew that her father was on the point of leaving the place—it was not surprising that he had departed a little sooner than he had intended, nor was it surprising that, having learnt in their last interview that she did not wish to go with him, he should have decided to leave her behind. At the inquest Miss Rushton had kept back what she knew, which was wrong, no doubt ; but her motive for that was simply to prevent undeserved suffering and humiliation from falling upon a lady for whom she bore a devoted affection. It would have been better to tell the whole truth frankly ; but nobody could be hard

on an error caused by such unselfish feelings.

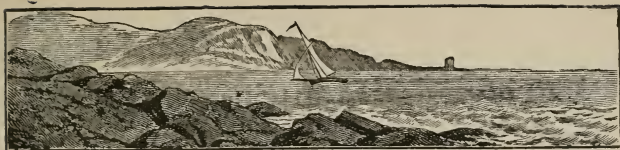
When Mr. Gibson had finished, the witness appeared in the box, and stated that his name was Thomas Harding. At the beginning of March he was working in a quarry near Bayford. On Monday, the fourth, he went to pay a visit to his mother, who lived up the valley, about a mile and a half beyond Kelvers. He went across the moorland late in the evening, and passed close to Kelvers. He went through the little wood near the house, and saw just before him a lady, walking fast. She was in the path that ran through the middle of the wood, and he took a side path. He heard voices as he went, and presently came upon a man who was hurrying through the trees. He himself sat down on the wall of the wood to rest

a little, and he saw the lady go up to the door of the house and knock. She knocked twice, and then she went away back through the wood. She couldn't have been more than two minutes or so talking to the man. It happened before nine—he heard the church clock of St. Austin's strike a little time after. He could not see the lady's face—she was not near enough; and he could not say how she was dressed, but he noticed that she was carrying a little parcel in her hand as she went away. Being cross-examined, Harding declared that he was quite sure of the date, and gave his reasons for this certainty. He had heard nothing of the Kelvers murder till the other day, for he had been on the tramp looking for work.

When the witness stepped down, there was a long-drawn breath and rustle of

excitement in the court. Pelter moved restlessly and looked at the magistrates. There was a change in Gay's face which showed that it was a much greater effort than before to maintain her composure. The sudden quickening of hope was simply pain. Her dull despair had been easier to endure than the agonized suspense, which made every minute seem an hour. She clasped her hands tight, struggling to control herself during the endless interval while the magistrates held a consultation. At last it was at an end. Something was said—she did not know exactly what the words were—and the sick flutter of hope and fear was over. She was free !





CHAPTER X.

“ THINK OF ME.”

“ Most choice, forsaken ; and most lov'd despised !
Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon.”

King Lear.

SHE was carried off at once by Lucy Mildmay to Mrs. Bruce's house, where she was treated with all the tenderness that affection and compassion could devise.

When she was brought face to face with Mrs. Bruce, the old lady's interest in her as an object of general curiosity gave place to real pity for what she had suffered. She was quite sure that her guest would

have a bad illness. It was decidedly the proper thing in her circumstances, and she was full of kindly fussy attentions to her.

When Thornburgh came to inquire after Gay he was grievously alarmed by Mrs. Bruce's doleful prognostics. The poor girl was quite prostrate with what she had gone through. She was not able to come downstairs, and the least that could be expected was an attack of brain fever.

But Gay did not answer these expectations. She did not take to her bed, and after the first few days she declared that she was quite well and would not even lead a semi-invalid life. Mrs. Bruce was disappointed in her guest. It would have greatly added to the interest of life to have her laid up, with the doctor in attendance.

Thornburgh came daily to hear how

Gay was, but he did not ask to see her. He would not disturb her by a meeting which might cause her agitation. About a week after she was set free, he was told when he called that the mistress of the house had visitors with her, and Miss Mildmay was in the dining-room.

"I will see Miss Mildmay," said Thornburgh, and the parlour-maid led him to that lady's presence.

"Gay is in the morning-room," observed Lucy, when she had greeted her cousin. "You might come to see her. You must be very quiet. She cannot bear any excitement."

"Of course"—with curt disdain for such an unnecessary warning.

Gay was lying languidly back in a low chair. She did not seem at all disturbed by Thornburgh's approach. She greeted

him with a faint smile and remarked on the bright spring weather. He did not find composure so easy as it had appeared in anticipation. It was an effort to master the rush of emotion which came over him, as he saw the mournful sadness of her eyes, and felt how thin her hand was. He talked to Lucy for a little while before he dared look full at Gay again.

“You are getting better?” he said gently.

“Oh yes, thank you, I am much better. I shall soon be quite well,” she replied.

Then Lucy took the word and chatted diligently, taking great care to keep to indifferent subjects, and now and then Gay contributed a remark. Thornburgh carried on the talk with a growing feeling of disappointment. When he had longed to see Gay again, he had hoped for some-

thing very different from this. He had resolved to be very careful not to agitate her, but he had not expected that their meeting would lose all character in the trivialities of a formal call. He had told himself that love-making would be out of the question till she was a little stronger, but he had not intended to keep quite at the distance which became an ordinary acquaintance.

When he said good-bye to Gay, he held her hand close, and looked down at her with an expression which was sufficiently unlike what an acquaintance would wear. She met his eyes and looked away at once, colouring.

"Good-bye," she said hurriedly, drawing her fingers from his clasp.

He had a business engagement the next day which kept him from Castleton,

but the day after he went to Mrs. Bruce's. Lucy received him alone, and to his inquiry for Gay replied that he could not see her.

"It has done her quite harm enough to see you once. If I had had the least idea of the effect you would have upon her, I should not have allowed a meeting," she said curtly.

"Why," he exclaimed, aghast at the gross injustice of this statement, "I did not say a word to excite her. I could not have talked more commonplace nothings, if she were my grandmother."

Lucy shrugged her shoulders.

"I admit that you were irreproachably tame—even flat in your remarks. But your eyes must have been more indiscreet than your tongue, or your mere

presence must have had an agitating influence—anyway, you did a great deal of mischief."

"In what way?"

"She was quite quiet and passive before she saw you, and was resting as she ought to rest. But since then she has been upset and excited. Yesterday she said she wished to see Mr. Gibson, and sent him a note asking him to call. He is coming to-morrow—he had to go into the country to-day. She wants to see him about her father's money. She said she must think of the future. I feel sure that she intends to arrange things so that she can get away from here."

"Away from me, do you mean?"

"Well," a little drily, "it looks like it. She never spoke a word of going away till after you had been here."

"But this is utterly unreasonable!" cried Thornburgh. "I will not bear it. Ask her to see me, Lucy."

His cousin looked dubious.

"Hadn't you better leave her alone just now? I wish that you would keep away for the present, Miles. I believe that if I could tell her that you were not likely to turn up for a while she might be persuaded to stay here quietly till she is a little stronger."

He was silent for a moment, thinking.

"No," he said abruptly, "I dare not risk it. I would do anything else for her, but that I can't do. If you think she is really not well enough to see me to-day, I will wait a little. But I must speak to her as soon as possible."

"She is well enough physically," said Lucy, in a deliberating tone.

"Then be very kind to me, Lucy, and bring her down," entreatingly.

After a little more persuasion, Lucy yielded and departed on her mission.

Gay was in her bedroom, a large cheerful room with a view of the garden and the river and open country beyond. She was sitting at the window, looking absently at the meadows and willows in the sunshine, and thinking of the future.

It was dim and undefined—but one thing she could see very plainly, and that was that Thornburgh would not be in it. He could be nothing to her henceforth. She had accepted that as a matter of course, and had never dreamt of anything else, till his look when he said good-bye had shown her that he did not see as clearly as she did that all was over between them.

That look had put an end to the pause after the storm which had laid her life waste. She dared not linger within reach of him ; she must bestir herself and take up the existence that remained to her now. Empty as it was, she was not tempted to turn to him. "He is sorry for me," she thought, "and he is very chivalrous, and feels obliged to stand by me because I am so forlorn and friendless. But I won't take advantage of his pity, it would be too selfish and mean, and it would do me no good. I couldn't be happy with him—now."

"Oh, I cannot!" she said shrinkingly, when Lucy had given her message.

"Don't you feel well enough to see him to-day, dear?"

"It isn't that. I would rather not see him."

"Why?"

"It would be better if I never saw him again," said Gay, with a troubled look.

"I am afraid nobody could persuade him to consent to that—not even you. Poor fellow, he looked so anxious to see you, that I felt quite sorry for him."

"Oh, don't—please don't!" in a tone of pain.

"It will be very unkind to send him away," persisted Lucy, coaxingly.

"I will go down," said Gay, abruptly.
"It must be done some time."

When the door of the morning-room opened, Thornburgh turned quickly.

"Thank you," he said in a low fervent tone, coming to her. "It is very good of you to see me."

She was silent as he took her hand in

both his, and she did not meet the eager eyes that rested on her.

"I wanted to see you before. I have never felt so impatient in all my life as I have done since you came here. It was very hard work to wait while I was longing for a sight of you. I have been very jealous of Lucy."

She looked at him with a grave set face, as if she was winding herself up to a painful effort.

"I thought it would be better to see you. I wanted to thank you. You were very kind when I was in prison; Lucy has told me that you sent me a great many things. And you did a great deal to find Harding. And I wanted to beg you to forgive me for all the pain you have suffered through me. I behaved very ill to you in the winter. I ought to have

treated you quite differently, for I knew that I was not a fit person for you to care about, and that if you had known all about me you would never have thought of doing so. It was selfish and wrong, and I have been very sorry. I should like you to know that, before we say good-bye."

Her voice was a little hurried in the last sentence, and she looked at him with an expression that entreated him to spare her.

"But why should we say good-bye," he rejoined, "when I love you?"

"Not now—you cannot love me now."

"I love you better than I did that day on the moor when I asked you to be my wife. I know all about you now, and it makes no difference—yes, it does, I love you more for all you have borne, and all you have done. You sent me away then,

but now there is no obstacle between us, and I will not be sent away."

"But there *is* an obstacle—a worse obstacle than there was that day. Everybody knows about my father—you cannot marry his daughter. I am not worthy of an honourable man's name," she said bitterly.

Thornburgh protested that her view of her father was utterly morbid. It was ridiculous that they should be separated because he had not been all that could be wished. His history would be forgotten soon, and his failings could not make Gay herself one whit less desirable as a wife.

He argued, protested, and pleaded, with a force and a determination to prevail which soon made Gay perceive that she had committed a great blunder in seeing him then. It had seemed so simple and

inevitable that he should not marry her, that she had never imagined there would be any great difficulty in breaking with him. But she had not foreseen the advantage which her lack of physical strength would give him. She felt that his energy was subduing her, and that there was nothing for it but retreat.

"I wish you would go away and not see me for a while," she said. "I cannot give you an answer now ; I must have time."

"How much time do you want—a week?"

"Oh no," quickly, "that wouldn't be enough. Give me a month or two—I shall be strong then. Please do that for me."

"No, Gay, I will not do that," he returned firmly. "If I do, I know what will follow. I shall come back at the end

of the month or two to find that you have disappeared. That is what you will do; as you have this foolish notion that you ought to give me up, you will hide yourself to do it most effectually. You are unscrupulous in your propensity to make sacrifices. It was impossible to prevent you from sacrificing yourself; but I decline altogether to let you sacrifice me to your sense of duty."

"I do not mean to hide myself; indeed, I have no such plan. But I cannot give you my answer now—I dare not."

"But why? Is it such a tremendous effort to say what I want you to say? Why do you wish for any delay?"

She hesitated, then she said wearily—

"When you ask me now, I only feel that I must do as you wish. Oh, please let me speak," as he made a quick move-

ment towards her. She summoned her strength and spoke steadily and clearly. "I ought not to marry you ; I know that. It will be a great misfortune for you ; and some day you will be sorry, and then I shall break my heart. If you would take time, you would see how much, much better it would be to let me go—I am sure you would."

"And if I should not be so wise ?"

"I should be strong enough then to speak to you properly. I cannot now—I feel stupid and helpless."

"You will be strong enough to convince me that you are right and to refuse me ?"

She did not answer.

"But if I am persistent now, you will accept me ?"

She looked round with a helpless air.

"I am afraid so. But, oh, you won't

make me do what I know I ought not to do? You wouldn't like to think that I had given in because I was ill?"

"Gay, dear," he said, very quietly, "will you try to think of me in this question?"

"Why, that is just what I want to do!"

"Look at it in another way; think of it all round. I love you—I love you with all my heart. I have been very unhappy on your account, and now, when you might make me happy, you propose that I should go away and give you a chance of making me utterly wretched by refusing me! I would go away at once—I would never trouble you again, if you did not care for me. But you have told me that you do care for me—you would never have let me kiss you that day, if you did not; and that gives me a right to claim you. How can you imagine that you can persuade

me to give you up, when you love me, and your love is the one thing I want?"

"But that seems so long ago. Sometimes I think I have lost all feeling; I am like a stone. I don't feel now as I did then."

"That is because you are not strong yet, my darling," he said reassuringly.

"But—— Oh, listen to me!" she cried, with a last desperate effort to hold her own. "You must not marry me! You must not have a wife that people will talk about and look coldly on."

"They cannot say anything about you that I shall not be proud of. You cannot frighten me away, my sweet; the phantoms that your imagination conjures up don't affect me at all. We are going to be happy after all your troubles. I shall make you forget them soon, my darling.

Come, smile at me and say you believe in my power."

She smiled faintly, and let her head fall on his shoulder.

"I ought not to give in to you, but——"

"Luckily for me you are not equal to a long struggle," he said, kissing her. "You need not grudge me my victory ; it is the first over you I have to boast of. Before this, you always held out against me, and I had the worst of it ; it is high time that you should give in to me."

"Oh, by the way," he said, bethinking himself later, when he was going away, "there is something I have to ask you. Lucy told me that you are going to see Gibson to-morrow. Can't I see him for you ? It is my business now to look after your affairs, and save you trouble, you

know. Tell me what you want to have done, and I will see to it."

"I would rather see him myself, thank you ; it would be better."

"But are you fit for it?"

"Oh yes ; I can do it. It has to be done," she said, unconsciously putting into words the ruling principle of all her life.

Thornburgh looked dissatisfied.

"I wish you would let me do it for you, dearest. You must give up your independence now, and you may as well begin at once. 'It has to be done!'" he quoted, with a smile.

"It isn't that I want to be independent ; indeed, indeed, I never thought of that ! But I would rather do this piece of business alone. It is only this—I want Mr. Gibson to find out all the people he can that my father owed money to. They

must be paid out of the property he left. It will hurt me less to speak about it myself than to know that you have to speak about it. I should feel so ashamed before you."

"But——"

"Oh yes, yes," she broke in hurriedly; "you must bear some of his disgrace, and it is childish to strain at a gnat like this. But I can't help it; please let me have my own way."

"Of course you must have your own way. But please remember for the future that you have a devoted servant whose first duty is to manage things for you, and that you must give him orders instead of acting for yourself."





CHAPTER XI.

A BEGINNING AND AN END.

“I can save,
Nay, I have saved you.”

Strafford.

THE betrothal was concluded in melancholy circumstances; and little brightness was given to it by the way in which Thornburgh's relations and friends received it. Lucy Mildmay wished the pair joy heartily, and prophesied good things for them; but her congratulations stood alone. Sophy sent a letter of raptures; but it was not happily conceived, for she expressed exaggerated

admiration of Thornburgh's devotion, and congratulated Gay on it fervently as something surprising. Neither of the *fiancés* was gratified by her felicitations. The other good wishes that were expressed were too plainly a matter of form.

Thornburgh was generally considered to be the victim of a foolish infatuation. A few, like Sophy, admired his devotion, but their admiration was closely related to pity; it was fine to be faithful to his love, in spite of such experiences and such a father, but it would have been wiser to marry somebody that had not had such unpleasant trials. Romance is all very well; but a wife that has unexceptionable belongings, and knows nothing of the inside of a prison, gives more solid satisfaction in the long run, and that the poor fellow would find out.

The poor fellow was utterly indifferent to the opinion of outsiders. At no time had it been an object with him to do what would be approved by Mr. X or Mrs. Z ; for he had a firm conviction that he could direct his own life better than a committee of his neighbours could do it for him, and he was too full of satisfaction to trouble himself as to how the world regarded the step he had taken.

He was eager to be married as soon as possible, and he proposed that it should be early in May. Pelter was to be tried at the spring assizes, and Gay had to be a witness, so an interval must be allowed after that.

“It is a thousand pities,” said Lucy, “that she has to be a witness ; it prevents her from forgetting the horrors she has been through. And she feels so much that her evidence will tell against the man,

as she persists in believing that his story is true, and that her father committed suicide."

"Yes; I wish she could think that the man is guilty; it would save her feelings. It is peculiarly unfortunate that she cannot be spared appearing at the trial," said Thornburgh.

"She will soon recover her spirits when it is over, and she is in your hands," said Lucy, cheerfully. "I suppose you wish to be married in London?"

"Of course. She shall not give any entertainment that can be avoided to the gossips here. Can you get her interested in buying her *trousseau*? If she were like other women, one could hope that it would divert her mind."

"I fear she is insensible to the charms of new frocks at present; but I will do

my best to stir up some wholesome frivolity in her. Luckily, she is able to get very nice things."

(Mr. Gibson, being commissioned by Gay to inquire into her father's affairs, and specially to find out what claims there were on behalf of the company he had spoken of, had found that matters stood pretty much as Mr. Rushton had said. The company was beginning to pay, and his investment in it promised so well that Gay would not be penniless, even when a liberal allowance was made for Mr. Rushton's old debts.)

Gay's entrance interrupted the talk, and after a minute or two Lucy left the two together. When she was gone, Gay took a letter out of her pocket, and gave it to Thornburgh.

"I want you to read that," she said.

It was from the manager of a music-hall in Liverpool, who offered Miss Rushton an engagement as a singer.

“What insolence!” cried Thornburgh, angrily, tearing the sheet across. “Of course you won’t answer the fellow!”

“Oh yes, I will answer him; he doesn’t mean any insolence. He thinks that I should draw, and, for all he knows, I might be glad of the salary. That is what I have come to, you see—that is my level. I am not fit to be your wife. I wish you would believe that and let me go. I know that I am doing you a great wrong.”

“I won’t argue the point with you again, Gay; we have settled it, and it is too late to start it afresh. I should be angry if I supposed you could seriously believe me to be such a poor creature as

to think less of you because a vulgar brute insults you. When you are well again, you will have a little more respect for me, I hope. There is nobody in the world so fit as you to be my wife, for you are the one only woman that I have ever really wanted for my own. Now I want you to do something for me ;” and he made his request, that she would consent to be married soon after the trial.

He was very much in earnest, and she presently agreed to what he proposed. But her misgivings and fears were not banished by his persuasive eloquence, or by the kisses and thanks with which he greeted her surrender.

“I wish,” she said, in the languid tone in which she always spoke now, “that I could believe you will reproach me afterwards, when you find out you have made

a great mistake. It would seem fairer if I could be punished for my selfishness."

"Gay, Gay, you are too perverse," he said, laughing. "Will it please you if I promise to lose no time in telling you, when I am convinced that I have made a mistake?"

"You will never tell me; you will try hard to prevent me from finding out. You are so good and generous," with a break in her voice.

He only answered by speaking of the arrangements that must be made for the marriage. He was not to be cast down by her gloomy forecast of the future. She could not be expected to show the happy hopefulness of a bride expectant. By-and-by her melancholy would depart, and she would entertain no more morbid fears for his happiness.

When Mrs. Bruce heard how short the engagement was to be, she expressed regret that the pair were not to be married at Castleton. She would have liked to have the wedding from her house—the preparation and the fuss attendant on the very quietest of weddings would have been a charming episode and an abundant reward for her kindness to Gay. But she was convinced by Lucy that, under the circumstances, it would be better taste to avoid the spectators that would assuredly flock to a church in Castleton, and then she struck out a new idea.

“Lucy,” she said, “I have a very good mind to go to London myself, and have Gay staying with me till she is married.”

“My dear auntie, what a kind thought!”

Mrs. Bruce was gratified by this

applause, and went on with the gravity due to the occasion. She proposed to make a tremendous break in her usual habits, and such a step was not to be rated lightly.

“It will be nicer for her to have the countenance of some, at least, of the family; and as Miles is determined to marry her, it is better that his friends should stand by him. I do not approve of the way in which your brother is behaving; he shows a great want of good feeling, it seems to me. It can only end in an open quarrel, and that sort of thing is so unpleasant. I am surprised at him.”

“James is behaving very badly,” said Lucy; “but I am not surprised at all. He cannot forgive Gay for having brought herself and the family story before the public; and he could not bear to have

anything to do with her, for she will always remind him of the hateful business. It must be difficult for him not to feel repelled from Sophy by the remembrance that she has been talked about ; he is not of a magnanimous disposition where women are concerned."

"Well, of course it is a pity that Gay has been through such things—it does make a difference. But as she was really not to blame, James should get over it, and let the thing die out. I don't say that I think Miles is acting wisely—a girl in his own set, with unobjectionable belongings would have been my choice for him,—and I hope he mayn't repent when he has cooled down and come to the realities of life. But as the marriage is to be, we should make the best of it ; and I think it will do something to put

a good face on it before the world, if Gay is with me when they are married."

"Oh yes, indeed, it will do a great deal. Miles will be very glad of it. You must give away the bride, Aunt Eliza."

Mrs. Bruce looked pleased. She had a harmless pleasure in being important.

"Do you think so, my dear? But would it do not to have a man?"

"It isn't necessary to have a man, and you are decidedly the proper person for the office. You must not refuse; both Miles and Gay would like you better than anybody else."

After that Mrs. Bruce never wavered in her intention to take the bride under her wing, and the good effect of her personal interest in the wedding was apparent at once in her change of tone when she spoke of the affair. She had

talked of it to her friends with a mildly regretful and apologetic air, which showed plainly that she made the best of it with an effort: but now she boldly launched into praises of Gay, and dwelt with fervour on Miles's attachment to her.

"It was quite romantic, and one so seldom heard of a thorough love affair nowadays. And nobody could think any worse of Miss Rushton for the dreadful troubles she had had to bear—it was no discredit to her—any body might be wrongly suspected. She had behaved so nobly in preventing Sophy Mildmay from hearing that her first husband was not dead."

Mrs. Bruce even found that the first husband might be regarded with charity.

"It was very sad and shocking, and no doubt he had been very wild; but

he had been severely punished--coming back to find himself homeless; and at least he had done what he could to atone for his faults. He had not molested Sophy. What he must have suffered in feeling himself lost to his family, poor creature!"

The old lady's friends accepted her cue, and it became the proper thing at her tea-parties to call Gay a heroine, instead of speaking of her as "poor Miss Rushton" in a suppressed tone (intended to convey discreet sympathy with her future relations by marriage) while the "poor" was transferred to her father.

This scrap of the eternal comedy which human egotism plays was incongruous enough with the gloomy scenes that were taking place at the same time. . The

trial was held, and Castleton had a last opportunity of staring at Miss Rushton—that was the great interest of the occasion. She was gently dealt with by the lawyers, and her evidence was quickly got through; too quickly for the gossip-mongers, who delighted to gaze upon the tableau formed by her in the witness-box, and Thornburgh standing beside it waiting to take her away.

The whole trial was a brief performance, and it ended, as everybody expected, in a verdict of “guilty.” It would have been infinitely better, Pelter’s lawyer said with vexation, if the accused man had held his tongue about the business in which Mr. Rushton had cheated him. It was playing into the hands of the prosecution to acknowledge that he had a long-standing grudge against his employer. But

Pelter could not be brought to regret that he had spoken out.

"I don't choose to be considered a common thief," he said. "I've not come to that, and I'm not going to be looked down on by people."

It was only Gay Rushton's opinion that he cared for, but his feeling for her was something to be shyly hidden in his own breast.

"Why, would you rather be considered a murderer?" asked the lawyer.

"It's more respectable than thieving," was all he would say.

He took his sentence with unshaken composure—all the agitation he was capable of on that ground he had felt in his struggle when he was going to leave England—and waited in stolid indifference for the end.

No effort was made to save him ; there was nothing in his case to excite public attention and commiseration. He was not a person of good position, whom it was sad to see in the ranks of criminals ; and no special circumstances of romance or atrocity made his murder interesting, or suggested that he was out of his mind. A servant who had murdered his master that he might rob him—society was well rid of him, and the law had better take its course.

The chaplain of the prison found him very unsatisfactory. He steadily refused to make confession—he had said all he had to say already, and he wasn't going back from it. He seemed to pay very little attention to the exhortations that were addressed to him, till one day the clergyman, to give a shock to his

dormant conscience, spoke solemnly of the future which awaits impenitent sinners. He was gratified to see that the dull blank look left the condemned man's face; he turned to the speaker and listened intently.

"It will be made pretty hot *then*?" he said. "Read it out of the Bible to me, sir."

The chaplain read the parable of Dives and Lazarus, and some other passages, hoping fervently that an impression had been made. But Pelter seemed to be soothed by the awful picture of the state of the lost; he smiled as he listened, and sighed with evident enjoyment at the end.

"Folks don't go scot-free after all," he said. "They're made to feel some time, thank the Lord! Thank you, sir."

After that, he read the Bible for him-

self, and every threatening of punishment that he found seemed to delight him. Promises of pardon and mercy passed him by—*that* was not what he wanted: the man's rough nature craved to see retribution dealt out to his enemy, and his own fate in the unknown was a question that did not trouble him.

He was told that Miss Rushton wished to see him, and at first he refused a visit from her.

"What's the good?" he said. "Tell her she had better keep away."

But, after a little while, his mood changed, and he said gloomily, "If she wants to see me, she may come."

Gay's wish had been strongly opposed. But she was not to be shaken by remonstrance or entreaty—this visit was part of her inheritance.

Pelter shot one glance at her when she entered his cell, and then looked down with the expression which his keepers called sullen.

"Pelter," she said hurriedly, "will you tell me whether you have any relations that you would like to be provided for?"

He looked up in surprise.

"No, miss; I haven't any."

"There is nobody that you would have left money to, if you could?"

"Not a soul belonging to me!"

"I wanted to know. I should have liked to give you back something for the money you lost in that mine."

"There's nobody to give it to."

There was a pause, during which Gay realized to the full the truth of Thornburgh's assurance that she would find

the interview unbearably painful. It was horrible to see the man before her and think of his doom.

"No, there's nobody to care what becomes of me," said Pelter. "I shan't leave any mourners. I wonder you believed any of my story—nobody seemed to think it worth a cent."

"I believed it," she said mournfully. "I believed all you said."

"What—that I didn't do it?"

"Yes, I am sure you were telling the truth."

A softer look came over his face.

"I'm glad of that," he muttered. "It all happened just as I said. It was his own doing. I hated him; but I never lifted my hand to hurt him. The parson keeps bothering me to confess, but I haven't anything to confess."

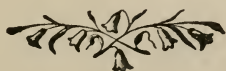
"Time's up, ma'am," said the warder, who had kept as far away as the narrow limits of the cell allowed.

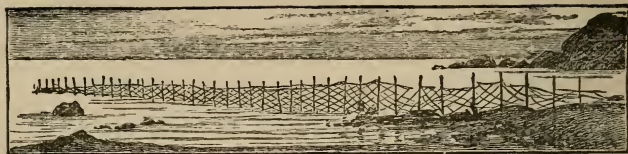
Gay had had to promise that she would make a very brief stay, and she rose at once.

"You shouldn't have come, miss," said Pelter, gruffly, looking at her marble-pale face. "It's too much for you. But I'm thankful that you've told me you believed me. And"—he made a pause, then blurted out—"if I could have prevented all the bother you had, I would. I had my passage taken, and I might have got away; but I couldn't go, because I wanted to get you off. You'll believe that?"

The door closed on her, and Pelter sat down on his bed, and covered his face with his hands to shut out for a little

while the world that disbelieved him, and dwell undisturbed on the last look he had seen in her eyes. She believed him—she would remember all her life that he had done what he could for her. He had his reward, and could meet his fate content. He was “not all unhappy” in his death. And, indeed, the memory of many a respectable citizen, whose career was as outwardly blameless as it was unflinchingly selfish, has not been cherished with a tithe of the passionate gratitude with which Gay always thought of Pelter in his dishonoured grave.





CHAPTER XII.

“ON BROKEN WING.”

“Shall my heart’s warmth not nurse thee into strength?”

A Blot on the Scutcheon.

THE wedding, Mrs. Bruce had often told her friends, must be as private and quiet as possible, as the bride was in such recent mourning; but not till the day came did she fully realize how utterly the occasion was to be stripped of ornament and festivity. It was really melancholy. She and Lucy were the only onlookers, except the clerk and an ancient pew-opener. Gay wore a very quiet travelling

dress, with no touch of adornment, except a knot of white flowers at her throat, and looked so pale and sad that one might have thought she was a reluctant bride; Miles was nervous; Lucy was grave; and the clergyman, an elderly man with a harsh voice, read through the service as if a bet depended on his getting it done in a certain time, hurrying on after "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" so that Mrs. Bruce's part was almost suppressed.

The old lady felt that she had thrown money away when she got the handsome gown of violet satin and the bonnet to match, which she was wearing. An old garment would have been quite good enough for this ceremony and this dingy empty church, where she could see the dust lying thick on the floor. She drew

up her train as well as she could out of the dust, and began to doubt the happiness which would follow such an ill-omened wedding. No wonder the bridegroom looked anxious, poor fellow ; he must feel as if he were marrying a ghost.

“ And are not afraid with any amazement,” read the clergyman, in one breath, and shut up his book. The signing was got through with despatch—it was a remarkably quiet, business-like wedding party, for there was no congratulating, no kissing the bride in the vestry. The clergyman noted this with satisfaction ; he would be in good time for the committee meeting, which was next on his list of duties ; and he forgave the bridegroom for having given him very short notice, and chosen a day when he was rather harder worked than usual.

His emotions became even more amiable when his fee was put into his hand. It was a much larger sum than he was accustomed to receive, and would pay for the stay at the seaside which his sickly daughter was longing for. "He must be rejoiced to get his wife," he reflected, "and she's nothing to look at—a pale thin creature. Wonder who they are."

"Ah," said the clerk to the pew-opener, as they left the church, "I wish we had more such weddings. It looked a very shabby affair—so few people and not as much as a favour on the 'orses' 'eads. But the gentleman was princely with the fees, and I'd rather the money was spent that way than on show as does us no good."

Luncheon was ready for the party when they returned. The table was adorned

with flowers; a wedding - cake gave character to the repast; and Mrs. Bruce had ordered champagne. But it was an unsatisfactory meal. Lucy was absent part of the time, overlooking her aunt's maid, who was putting the finishing touches to the packing of the bride's luggage. Gay ate scarcely anything and said nothing; Thornburgh talked of the weather, and Mrs. Bruce found it impossible to make any remarks appropriate to the occasion, as he was so determined to behave as if it were an ordinary luncheon.

"You won't go away without cutting the cake, Gay?" said the old lady at last, seeing that Gay was rising. That observance at least she would not consent to omit. "You must do that."

"Oh, by the way, that reminds me,"

said Lucy, abruptly. "I have a letter here from Jim, which I want to show you. I got it this morning."

The letter ran as follows :—

"DEAR AUNT LUCY,

"I hope you are quite well. Father says I cannot go to the wedding because Gay isn't well, and it must be very quiet. I told him I would not make any noise, but he won't let me go, and I think it is a shame. I want to give Gay a present. Please buy her a bracelet or necklace—I don't care which—and tell her it is my present, and I will pay you out of my own money. I have got twenty pounds, so you can get a nice one. With love,

"Your affectionate nephew,

"JAMES MILD MAY.

"Give Gay my love. I am sorry she is going to marry Cousin Miles, because now she won't live at our house. I told William, and he said, 'Send my respects, and he saw how it would be when the frost was.' Is Gay well enough to eat wedding-cake?"

"The darling!" murmured Gay, smiling, as she finished the effusion.

"I will get a bracelet and send it to you," said Lucy.

"Pray send him a good thick slice of cake," remarked Thornburgh. "He deserves it, and he will enjoy it thoroughly. I think William ought to have a piece, too."

"He is a generous little fellow," observed Mrs. Bruce, meaning, not William, but Jim. "I shall give him a desk; he writes so nicely that he ought to be encouraged."

"He has evidently taken great pains with this letter," said Lucy, "and written it in two sittings. The spelling is so amazingly correct that I should say we cannot give him the credit of it all."

It was time to depart. The leave-takings were as much slurred over as the rest of the performance had been, and in

a few minutes Lucy was saying, with a long breath—

"I am glad that is over!"

"So am I," said Mrs. Bruce. "It was a most depressing affair—not a bit like a wedding. I did my best to make things go off well, but for all the good I did, I might have stayed at home."

"Oh, auntie, you must not say that! It went off much better because you were here. Of course it was rather gloomy, as we all felt that it was trying for Gay, and we were afraid of upsetting her if we made any fuss, but it would have been much worse if you had been away. You were so composed that you kept us from showing how fidgety and nervous we were."

Mrs. Bruce became proud of the bareness and lack of brightness which she

had been deploring. It was evidently partly owing to her that bridal demonstrations had been so rigidly eschewed, and with restored complacency she looked forward to describing the ceremony and her new gown to her gossips.

Thornburgh had chosen a village on the Norfolk coast for the scene of the honeymoon. It was a very quiet place, several miles from a railway station, where the summer holiday-maker was scarcely known, and the tripper came not. He had taken a furnished house—"a cottage of gentility,"—which stood on a slope of the cliff, with wide views of the sea. Here Gay would be secure from any show of vulgar curiosity about the heroine of the Kelters case; here his love and the soothing influences of

sea and air would lull her into forgetfulness of all the painful past.

Here for a few weeks he was very happy. She was with him, all his own, and he could devote himself to her, and see her revive. The place suited her, and she improved steadily in health. She was no longer the worn white shadow he had brought there: the strained look left her eyes, and her cheeks gained a faint rose tint and something of roundness. It was perfect satisfaction at first to watch the improvement, but it did not keep pace with his hopes, and anxiety awoke within him.

She did not brighten in spirits as she grew stronger. There was a weight upon her which she could not shake off: it seemed as if life had lost its

taste for her. She was always passive and listless, following out any suggestion which he made for the disposal of their time, but never making one herself.

One day he asked her if she would like to go on the water that afternoon, and she replied as usual with an assent.

“Or would you prefer a drive?”

“I don’t care. Let us do which you like.”

“I wish I could see you a little wilful again, darling,” he said.

She started nervously and looked at him deprecatingly, as if he had found fault with her.

“Have you no wishes of your own?”

“I don’t care which I do. I am sorry,” putting her hand to her head with a troubled look, “but I don’t care very

much for anything. It makes me dull, I know."

"No, no, no," he protested, taking her hands and kissing them.

After that there was an end of her passive period. She showed no more indifference about their doings; when they went out, she no longer fell into long silences, dreamily watching sky or sea, but tried to be cheerful, and make talk; and he was less content than before. He blamed himself for having made that unlucky speech. Why could he not leave her to rest? All her life she had had to exert herself for other people's benefit. He might have had the grace to give her freedom, and not force her to make efforts which plainly were hurtful to her. The calm of her languor was broken up; she was troubled and ill at ease, and her

attempts at animation were generally followed by a fit of acute low spirits. Sometimes he saw that she had been shedding tears during his absence.

"You have been crying this afternoon," he said, on one occasion. "What has been troubling you?"

"Oh, nothing fresh—I am silly. I never used to cry, but now I have taken to it. I shall get over the weakness soon," she said hurriedly. "Tell me about your walk."

She had stayed indoors because it was windy and rainy.

"But you must not cry about old troubles, dearest. It is bad for you. Don't let your mind dwell on them—we have turned over a new leaf."

"I cannot help it sometimes; they come back, and it is worse to think of

them here than it was before. I wish I could forget, but—oh, Miles, I did a wicked thing when I married you. I am only a burden and trouble. Why didn't you let me go?"

He half scolded, half soothed her, and in a few minutes she had controlled her sobs, and said remorsefully—

"I ought not to say such things, but I am so imbecile sometimes. I can't help crying and making a fuss."

One day as they were sitting at breakfast, he remarked—

"Our time here is up next week. I took the place for two months, you know."

"Where are you thinking of going?" she asked, looking a little anxious.

"Well, I should like to go to town, if you think you are fit for it."

"Oh yes, dear, of course. I am all right now."

"We might stay there till August, and then go to Switzerland for a time. I thought of the Riviera for the winter. I daren't let you stay in London fogs."

"But" — opening her eyes — "your shooting? You will miss that."

"Oh, that doesn't matter! I am not an enthusiastic sportsman."

"You aren't going to Thornburgh this winter?" she said hesitatingly.

"No, I think not. I intend to let the house for a time"—in a careless tone.

"But——" She reddened, then the colour faded. "You are doing that on my account," she said in a low voice.

"Why, you did not suppose that I

was going to take you to a place that has such painful associations for you? I never thought of living there for the present."

"Then you have to give up your home for me?"

"Oh no. My home is where you are, dearest."

"You never let strangers live in your house before, and I have turned you out and separated you from your friends."

"Your view of the case is far too serious," he returned, with a smile. "The separation from my friends is not final. It will only serve to endear me to them by making them miss me. We shall go to Thornburgh after a time. Meanwhile, we had better let the house be inhabited and get rent for it. It is a very simple

business arrangement—you really must not take it to heart.”

“I—I am glad of it, Miles. I was dreading going to Thornburgh. But it hurts me that you have to make such a change. I am not worth all the trouble I give you.”

“Not worth the sacrifice for a little time of the society of my dear dull neighbours there? Why, Gay, you ought to consider that you are conferring a benefit upon me. You will save me from hearing Saville’s stories or Ashton’s parish experiences.”

“But your relations—you like them?”

“Oh yes. I like them—always excepting James Mildmay; but even the Fletchers are not lively companions. I can bear absence from them with perfect resignation. Suppose we have a drive this

morning? the tide is low, and we can go on the beach. Go and put your hat on."

She obeyed and said no more about Thornburgh Hall, but she was dejected and listless for the rest of the day. In the evening he went out for a solitary stroll, and indulged in somewhat sombre reflections. Their stay here had certainly not done what he had hoped for Gay. It was disappointing that she did not get on faster. He had felt so sure when she came there that he could bring back serenity and happiness to her, but his treatment was far from a success. "I seem to make her worse instead of better. What I do to save her from pain and agitation positively frets her. She cannot get rid of her morbid notion that she is a drag upon me, and instead of being

pleased, as any other woman would be, that she is my first thought, she is miserable because she thinks she costs me any sacrifice. What *am* I to do? If I could only see her look bright again! If love and care won't make her happy, what will?"

He was so sorely perplexed that a chill fear had begun to press upon him that his love was powerless because it was not returned. She *had* cared for him, but she had said herself that was a long time ago, before the tremendous storm which had overwhelmed her, and the feeling had gone. He had been confident that it would come back, as she became herself, but he had seen no sign yet of its return. She was always affectionate and gentle, but always a little cold and passive, receiving his tenderness, but never making any

response. Had her beginning of love been so rudely nipped that it could not recover, and never would be anything but an unfulfilled promise?





CHAPTER XIII.

THE BRIDE COMES HOME.

“O Hope of mine whose eyes are living love,
No eyes but hers—O Love and Hope the same!
Lean close to me.”

D. G. ROSSETTI.

HORNBURGH was returning homeward, unsolaced, when he heard a familiar voice hail him. He looked round in great surprise, and beheld a gig rapidly approaching, in which sat Mr. Mildmay. Next minute the vehicle was pulled up, and Mr. Mildmay alighted.

He uttered a hasty greeting, and went on—

"Sophy is very ill—dangerously ill, and she keeps on calling for Gay. Nothing will quiet her, and the doctors said that it would do her serious harm if her wish was not gratified. So I came to ask Gay to go to her."

He spoke in a stiff, constrained way. His errand was bitter to him. Nothing but urgent necessity would have brought him to ask for the help of the girl whom he had blamed so unsparingly and turned his back upon.

"I am very sorry that Sophy is so ill," said Thornburgh.

"Are you living near?"

"Yes, it is only five minutes' walk to the house by the fields."

"I'll walk with you."

Mr. Mildmay told the man to drive on, and as he and his cousin walked swiftly to

the cottage, he spoke of Sophy's illness. Her baby was dead, and she was in a high fever.

"She was quite light-headed, and begged and prayed me to fetch Gay—it was heart-breaking to hear her. I thought I had better come myself. If I had telegraphed you couldn't have got it in time to start this morning, so there was little loss of time."

"I am awfully sorry," said Thornburgh, again. "But you don't seem to understand how my wife has suffered in health. She is very far from strong and quite unfit to bear any worry."

"But you don't mean to say that you will not let her come?" cried the other.

Thornburgh did not mean that certainly; he could not have refused to let Sophy have what she wanted at such a time. But

he wished his cousin to know that he was asking a good deal, and that it was not quite a matter of course that he should take Gay up again, when he found it necessary.

Gay met them at the door of the house, with a look of alarm.

“Sophy?” she exclaimed.

Mr. Mildmay explained his errand.

“Oh yes, yes; I will go,” she returned eagerly. “When can we start?”

“If you can travel all night?” hesitatingly.

“Of course I can.”

“We could go from Eastham by the last train, and get to Bayford about noon to-morrow. That will be the quickest way.”

“Then we will do that,” returned Gay, in a brief business-like fashion. “You will

send for a carriage, Miles? I will get ready at once, while Mr. Mildmay has something to eat."

In half an hour, a wagonette was at the door, Gay was ready, and they set out. It was a fatiguing, comfortless journey, with many changes and long waiting at junctions. But at last its dragging hours ran out, and the drive from the station to Westby Lodge was accomplished.

"I may go to her at once?" said Gay, when she alighted from the carriage, and she went quickly across the hall and up the stairs. Mr. Mildmay followed, and Thornburgh waited in the dining-room, where the table was laid for a late breakfast.

Presently Mr. Mildmay came in.

"I think she is worse," he replied heavily, to his cousin's inquiry. "She is certainly more excited—she didn't know

me at all, did not answer when I spoke to her. But she knew Gay's voice directly."

"I hope Gay may soothe her."

"I don't know. She was greatly agitated at first, begged Gay to forgive her for keeping away from her, and told her again and again that it was not her fault."

"Poor Sophy!" said Thornburgh, involuntarily, more touched by the revelation that Sophy had grieved over her shortcomings towards Gay than even by her danger.

Mr. Mildmay bit his lips and kicked a piece of coal on the fire.

"Miles, I never thought she would feel it so much," he cried appealingly. "I should not have interfered, if I hadn't believed that it was for her own good. If I had guessed that she was brooding over it—good heavens, to think that

I have done her harm!" He broke down in a hard sob, and hastily recovered himself. "It's no good talking. Sit down and have some breakfast; you must need it, for one can never get anything fit to eat at railway refreshment rooms. What will Gay have, do you think? I will send a tray up to her."

The meal was eaten in melancholy silence. Mr. Mildmay was too much cast down to be capable of talking of indifferent things, and too much afraid of showing weakness to speak of Sophy.

Mrs. Fletcher, who had been tending Sophy during Mr. Mildmay's absence, came in as they finished breakfast, bearing a good account of the patient. She was quieter now, and seemed inclined to sleep.

Mrs. Fletcher greeted Thornburgh as

cordially as in old times ; under the shadow of this anxiety, she could not be stiff, and she laid aside her disapproval of Gay in her relief at the good effect which Gay's appearance had produced. She was at her best in a time of such trouble ; then her womanly kindness flowed out unchecked. And she felt that Thornburgh must be taken back to the arms of his relations now, and that his wife also must receive the family embrace.

So she spoke as amiably of Gay as she would have spoken of a bride that could boast descent from a line of bishops ; hoped she would not suffer from the fatigue of the journey, and said she was very sorry to see how delicate she looked. This last speech was a large leaf on the olive branch which Mrs. Fletcher brought in her hand—she meant

it to show that she intended to treat Gay's trials not as a discreditable episode, which should be shrouded in silence, but as a subject for commiseration. But Thornburgh did not understand his cousin's liberality of sentiment. To him her remarks had a "poor fellow, you must see your mistake now!" flavour, which was extremely unpalatable. Of course they would discover after a time that he did not make Gay happy, and they would pity him cordially.

"She cannot look well after such a journey," he returned. "It was awfully long and she could not sleep in the train. She is far from strong still—it takes time to recover from such a shock as she bore."

Mrs. Fletcher made a sympathetic murmur, and he added abruptly—

“When is Mabel to be married?”

“Some time in November, we think.”

And Mrs. Fletcher glided comfortably away into an account of Mr. Ashton's new living—pleasant neighbourhood, good society, large rectory, etc.

As soon as he could, Thornburgh betook himself to his own house. “You will stay here?” said Mr. Mildmay, “nothing can be ready for you;” but he declined the offered hospitality.

“No joyful tongue gave him his welcome home,” when he crossed his own threshold. His housekeeper received him with a dismay which sufficiently marked her disapproval of being taken by surprise, and punished him by giving a diffuse description of the various circumstances which rendered his appearance untimely—the carpet was up in this room,

that one had been shut up for weeks ; she was expecting the sweep to-morrow. "If only you had let me know, sir!" was the burden of her discourse.

"We were summoned suddenly to Westby Lodge. I did not know till yesterday evening that we were coming," Thornburgh explained.

But an explanation is a poor thing when an old servant's grievance is in question. Mrs. Mason was not to be deprived by any such shallow consideration of her right to complain.

"If you'd sent a telegram early this morning, sir, it would have done quite well," she said. "I could have got the place a little fit to be seen. I like to do my duty, and I'm very sorry that you should find the house so upset, especially when a bride is coming."

"Oh, never mind—your mistress will understand."

"But I'd have liked the place to do me credit, sir, when she saw it first," mournfully. "If I'd only known a little sooner! But when you said yourself that it was to be let, and you weren't coming——"

Thornburgh retreated from the down-pour, and went out till a room should be made habitable. This reception was too thoroughly in keeping with the worry and discomfort of the day. He spent some hours in walking, but in spite of this thoughtfulness on his part, Mrs. Mason had not recovered her equanimity when he returned.

"Dear, dear," she said, shaking her head as she set his dinner before him, "it doesn't seem lucky, sir, to see you

coming back without the mistress. It isn't such a home-coming as one would have expected."

No, it was not the home-coming that he had fondly dreamed of. He had looked forward to bringing Gay there when she was quite herself again, and they could enter upon their home in hope and brightness. He had come without the loving wife, who must be welcomed with caresses and tender words, and he was beginning to fear that she was only a creature of his imagination, and would never cross his threshold. Her love had "failed in frosts of spring;" however lavishly he poured out his deepest affection upon her, she could give him nothing but quiet liking. He had never yet been able to rouse her as the news of Sophy's illness had roused her.

It was not a heroic state of mind, to be jealous of a sick woman, and he was ashamed of it when he thought of her suffering, and her husband's anxiety. But when in the course of the evening he went to Westby Lodge, and heard that she was much better, his unworthy emotions revived, and grew stronger because he did not get a glimpse of Gay. She might have come down to him for a few minutes, at least; she would have come if she had wanted to see him half as much as he wanted to see her.

He slept late next morning, and when he came down, Mrs. Mason informed him that she had already sent her *aide* to inquire after Mrs. Mildmay, and learnt that she had had a good night and was doing well. Thornburgh sat long over his breakfast; he was in no hurry to go

to Westby Lodge. In his present mood he anticipated little satisfaction from a visit there. Gay would be wholly occupied with Sophy, and he did not care for a few crumbs of her attention.

He was given up to these perverse meditations when the door opened. He did not look up, supposing that Mrs. Mason was bringing in something. But nobody approached the table, and he turned a little impatiently to see Gay standing near the door, with a tremulous eagerness in her face.

He started to his feet, and next moment she was close to him, with her hands on his shoulders, looking straight into his eyes.

"Miles, do you love me?" she asked breathlessly.

He burst out laughing.

“Have you come to ask me that? Do you doubt it?”

“Tell me—tell me!”

“Love you—oh, you lovely creature, I adore you!” he cried with sudden passion as he saw the passion in her eyes.

He covered her face with kisses—at last his happiness had come to him.

“Oh, I was so frightened!” she cried. “It was early this morning—I was sitting by Sophy, and I thought of you, and all at once I woke up and felt alive. You don’t know what a change it was. I used to be so numb and stupid, as if all the life had gone out of me. I couldn’t care for anything, except that sometimes I felt wretched because I knew I was a trouble to you, and it seemed as if I should never be anything else—only a poor spoilt thing

that was not to be mended so as to be of any good. But this morning it came to me in a rush; and I loved you with all my heart, and I remembered how patient you had been with my dulness and complaints, and I wondered if I had tired you out and you were—sorry. I was frightened to death, Miles, for I don't deserve anything better, and as soon as I could leave Sophy, I hurried over to see you. What were you thinking about when I came in? You looked quite unhappy."

"I was thinking about you, wishing that you would get strong faster."

"Poor Miles, what a dreadful time you have had!" she said, pressing her cheek to his. "Oh, I will love you so well to make up for it all—I will make you happy now!"

A little later an imperative voice was heard at the door.

"Is Gay here? I want her."

Jim stopped short with a comical expression of surprise as he saw the attitude of the pair.

"Come in, Jim," said Gay, holding out her hand with a smile.

"Breakfast is ready," said Jim, "and they were looking for you everywhere, so I thought I would come and see if you were here. You'd better be quick, or else the things will be quite cold."

"You haven't had breakfast?" cried Thornburgh, seizing the bell-rope. "You must be starving. Bring some fresh coffee and eggs, Mason, please; your mistress has come over to breakfast."

The housekeeper smiled with marvellous amiability as her new mistress greeted

her, and quickly produced fresh supplies. On a broad hint that he would like some breakfast too, Jim was made welcome, and for some time he was silent as he disposed of cold fowl and ham and stronger coffee than he was generally allowed; but presently he remarked, *à propos* of nothing—

“Ross is fond of Mary the housemaid, and he puts his arm round her and kisses her sometimes, and nurse said they ought to know better.”

This observation was pointed by a stern gaze at Thornburgh.

“Ah,” he responded, unabashed, “that is quite a different thing, Jim. You see, Gay is married to me, and so it is my duty to kiss her.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Jim. “You looked,” severely, “as if you liked doing it.”

"Jim has a crude conception of duty," murmured Thornburgh, aside. "Certainly," he made reply, "that is part of the duty. It would be of no good if I didn't like it."

"Must Gay live in your house?"

"My house is her house now—of course she will live in it."

"Couldn't she live at our house? You could come and see her every day," suggested Jim.

"That wouldn't do at all. When people are married they have to live in the same house," said his cousin gravely.

"Mrs. Stevens doesn't live in her husband's house," said Jim, argumentatively. "He drinks, and she said she wouldn't put up with it, and went to her father's."

"Well, that is an exceptional case. If

I drank, I should certainly not deserve to have Gay with me. But so long as I behave myself properly she must stay with me."

"And," put in Gay, "I would rather be with Cousin Miles than anywhere else, Jim. But you can come and see me every day."

Jim grew more cheerful at this, though he still felt it hard that Gay should be taken away, and declared that it was very stupid of people to get married. He was making a careful inquiry as to the time of his daily visits when Mrs. Fletcher was shown in.

That lady had called to inquire how Sophy was, and then gone on to see Thornburgh. As they were on good terms again, he might be restored to his place of right-hand man. She had

missed him sadly, and had a good many questions to submit to him, for her son-in-law elect had a poor head for business. She went by the short cut through the grounds, thinking of Thornburgh with the tenderness which it is the amiable habit of humanity to feel for a person that one can pity. Nothing like a little misfortune for drawing the ties of affection closer.

Poor Miles, it was very sad that he had made such an unsuitable marriage. Evidently he was not happy—he did not look at all like a satisfied man; he had been quite gruff when she spoke of Gay's delicate appearance. How different with Mabel's *fiancé*—how gladly he talked of his lady, how he beamed when she was mentioned, how proud he was of her! Well, if poor Miles was disappointed, his people must

do all they could to lighten his burden. They must be very kind to his wife and help to fit her for her position, and in time, with the advice of experienced matrons, she might suit him better.

Full of these amiable intentions, Mrs. Fletcher asked for Mr. Thornburgh. She was conducted to the only sitting-room that was fit for use, and made a momentary pause on the threshold, smitten by surprise. For the unsatisfactory bride sat there, with soft, liquid eyes, a picture of happiness, and the man who was to be pitied was regarding her with an expression of supreme content. Mrs. Fletcher's theory was disposed of at once and for ever, and she was kind-hearted enough to be glad that it was.

"You are looking much better," she said graciously to Gay. "I am very glad to see

it. Nobody would think you had been up last night."

"I slept during the first half of the night, and I feel quite rested and quite well, thank you."

"It is a great relief that Sophy is out of danger—we shall all be in better spirits now," said Mrs. Fletcher.

She made a brief visit. It was obvious that her cousin would be of no use to her so long as Gay was at hand—they might have been just engaged! She took Jim with her to spend the day at Tarn Hall, and Thornburgh was very glad to see that small third go.

"You have spoilt that child utterly," he said to Gay; "he wants too much of your attention."

"You can't have much of my attention now he is gone, for I must go back to

Sophy. I wish you would try to divert Mr. Mildmay a little—he wants some society. No, you are not to frown ; you must be good friends with him—he told me yesterday that he was very sorry he had been so angry with me.”

“Amazing concession ! What did you say ?”

“That I was very sorry for my shortcomings. Yes, I am, Miles ; I have feared again and again that I did wrong. I never doubted at the time—I felt that it would be better for Sophy to die than to know that she was not Mr. Mildmay’s wife—it was so shameful !—but, perhaps, if I had put truth first, things would have turned out better.” (“Poor Pelter,” she sighed to herself, “his fate might have been different.”) “So,” she went on aloud, “you must not be obdurate against Mr.

Mildmay, as I am sometimes of his mind."

"All right—I will make it up with him. While we are here—by the way, when you talked of Jim's daily visits, did you mean that we should stay here after you can leave Sophy? Are you sure you wish it?"

"Yes, quite sure. I am not afraid of the associations of the place now—so long as I am with you," she said softly.

THE END.

11





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